



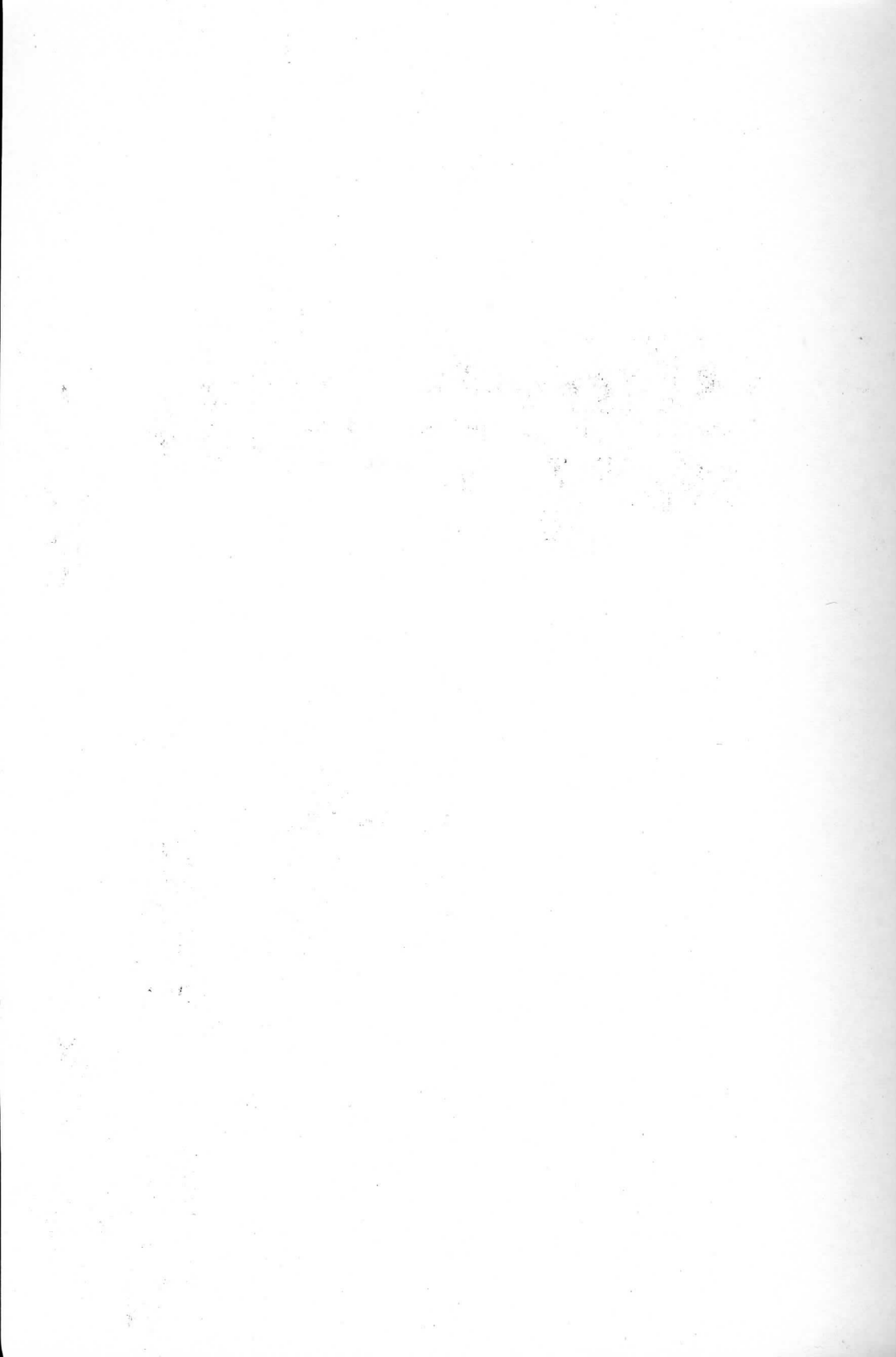
A FAR COUNTRY

Ursuline Mission

In Thailand

1924 - 1945

IRENE MAHONEY, O.S.U.





A FAR COUNTRY

Listen, my daughter, forget your country

And your father's house

THE URSULINES IN THAILAND 1924-1945

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IN MEMORY OF

MARY CHARLES ROBERTS, OSU

MISSIONARY IN THAILAND

1938-1998

A NOTE ON PROPER NAMES

Consistency is always a problem when transliterating Thai names into a western alphabet. In general I have adopted the spelling found in accepted western studies. Even this, however, does not guarantee consistency. Chieng Mai, for example, as well as King Prachatipok, are both subject to a variety of spellings from which one must choose.

In the matter of sisters' names, the problem is complicated by the number of nationalities involved and by the habit of changing the original name into its equivalent French form. Thus Xaveria Pirc becomes Xavier. Many other names endured the same shift. In most cases I have followed the form found in the document I was using.

Finally: the present kingdom of Thailand was known as Siam until 1939. Thus, throughout this history I have referred to the country as "Siam" until the year when it officially became Thailand.

MAP OF THAILAND



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PREFACE

My first conscious awareness of Thailand came when I was about ten. I was reading a novel about a Protestant missionary who had recently arrived in what was then "Siam." I stumbled over words I had never seen before: wat, stupa, panung, Buddha... Everything bewildered me. My recollection is that I didn't finish the book. It was the first time I had experienced a culture so different from my own that my childish mind could make nothing of it. My second vivid awareness came when a sister-companion from the Ursuline House of Studies, having just pronounced her perpetual vows, left us—amid tears and admiration—for the mysterious mission of Thailand.

It was not until forty years later that I had the privilege of visiting our mission in Thailand. The mystery remained but my admiration grew as I visited the spacious and successful schools and convents that the Ursulines had established since their arrival seventy years before. Several years later I was honored by the request to write the history of this flourishing mission. As I began to survey the material, I began to realize that the scope was larger than I wanted to undertake. A reasonable division seemed to be from the beginnings in 1924 through World War II in 1945. The world changed after the war. Although western missionaries continued to come, native vocations increased and in time the works of the mission became more diversified. 1945 seemed like a natural break and so this volume will conclude with that year. The succeeding story will be left for another enterprising historian.

The period between 1924 and 1945, although only twenty years in scope, covers the most critical period of the Ursuline mission. How could it succeed, I often wondered, as I poured over the letters and documents of those early years. That it did succeed is in itself a miraculous proof of God's mercy. As Mother Marie Bernard Mancel used to say, "We are in

God's hands now." Surely they were. The history of the early years of the Ursuline mission in Thailand is a story of courage, endurance, determination—and prayer.

My indebtedness is manifold. First of all to the Archives of the Ursuline Generalate in Rome, then under the direction of Luciana Mariani. I am also indebted to Sister Anne Lemaire, director of the Ursuline Archives at Beaugency, France. M. Moussaye of the Archives of the Missions Etrangères de Paris has been consistently generous in providing background material. And here I must also acknowledge my debt to Sister Bernadette-Josèphe Berquer who generously undertook to photocopy materials from the archives of the MEP and thus saved me weeks of travel. My greatest debt is, of course, to the Ursulines of Thailand who opened up all their records and provided me with ideal working space during my weeks in Bangkok and Chiang Mai. It is from their archives in *Mater Dei* and *Regina Coeli* that almost all of the photographs have been drawn. Special gratitude is due Sisters Benigna Biemens, Stanislas Bosnak, Véronique Poutrain, Theophane Westerman who generously shared their memories of the early days.

Closer to home I must acknowledge Sisters Dolores Yanshak and Carol Marie Keaney for their help in translating from the Dutch and to Susan Conti for her help with an Italian document. Irene Kutsky and Alice Gallin read the manuscript, chapter by chapter, providing the encouragement and enthusiasm that every author needs.

One member of the Thai province stands out for me: Mary Charles Roberts. During my last visit to Bangkok Sister Charles was ill, wheelchair bound, but full of life and enthusiasm. Every afternoon I went to her room and for an hour we talked—she shared memories of the early days, of what it had been like in that “far country” to which she had first come sixty years before. But we also talked about America, about people we both knew, concerns we both shared. They were wonderful afternoons, full of insight—and laughter and I gained a little understanding of why she had been such a venerated superior and such a dearly-loved companion. The day after-I

finished the manuscript for this book, I received word of her death. Without a moment's hesitation I knew that it would be dedicated to her: The good and faithful servant of the Gospel who put her hand to the plow and never looked back.

October 21, 1999

Feast of St. Ursula

CHAPTER ONE

"CHINA OR SIAM?"

In early summer of 1926 Angèle Lorenziutti, Superior General of the Ursulines in Rome, received a disturbing letter. It was postmarked "Bangkok" and was dated March 1. The condition of the recently established Ursuline mission of Siam had been an anxiety from the beginning. At first Angèle hoped that as the three young sisters adjusted to a life so different from what they had formerly experienced, the situation would improve. Now, as she read the distressing pleas of the superior, Marie Thérèse Mertens, she was not so sure. They had been in Bangkok nineteen months and the situation, if anything, had only grown more uncertain.

The present letter had a tone of desperation. Please, Thérèse begged, please send a sister from Rome to visit us here. "I have asked you this before and I dare to ask it again because I am sure that in her presence the bishop would yield a little and we could come to some good arrangement."

In her small, exact penmanship Marie Thérèse covered seven pages, describing in detail their difficulties: the endless work in preparing meals for the children, the orphans, the priests, as well as for themselves; the laundry for the church and the orphans, done under the most primitive

conditions. And, of course, their real work as Ursulines: the school, whose pupils kept increasing daily.

"We have three different meals to prepare six times a day," she continued, "and really, it is too much for us. I have already asked the bishop three times to give us a native sister to do the cooking but there is no answer to my request. Furthermore, our orphans are not nourished or clothed by the bishop but they work all day for him and the church. The location we are in is not adequate for us. We are all in one little place without any fresh air because we have no garden, only a tiny courtyard--and that's all."

The daily order, meticulously reported by Marie Thérèse, was daunting, especially in such a climate as Bangkok: up at 4:30, to Mass at 5:30, while one sister remained at home to wash and dress the little orphans; in class by 8:30 until noon; then to the kitchen to prepare something for the school children, for the orphans, and the priests. Custom indicated that none of these groups could eat together; while, in addition, the nuns themselves were bound by cloister to eat separately. After clean-up and Vespers they were back in the classroom until 4:30 when once again they returned to the kitchen to prepare for meals at six o'clock. "It's a real miracle," she concluded, "that our health has been able to sustain so much."

The question was, of course, how long their health could sustain it. Yet at the same time that Marie Thérèse recited their difficulties, she argued her belief in the value of a mission in Siam. "There is an immense future in Siam," she affirmed. But was it a future for the Ursulines at this time, Angèle wondered. If one were to read the signs carefully, it seemed that a hundred reasons could be found in favor of closing the mission and sending the young missionaries home until another less perilous opportunity could be found.

The first contact that the Ursulines had with Siam had come in the summer of 1923 when Bishop René Perros, in charge of the Vicariate of Siam, wrote to Bishop Fréri, head of the Propagation of the Faith. He was convinced, he wrote, that the Siamese church would flourish if he could

have a group of teaching sisters. Just a year before, Freri himself had made arrangements for a group of three Ursulines from Stanstead, Canada, to go to the Vicariate of Swatow in southern China. With this in mind, he immediately sent Perros' letter on to Mother Winefride, the superior of Stanstead, hopeful that she might see her way clear to sending a second group of sisters to the Orient. Stanstead, however, was a small community with few resources, and Winefride, despite her missionary inclinations, had no sisters to send.

The plea interested her, however, and she forwarded Perros' letter to Sister Marie du Rosaire, the superior in the newly formed Ursuline mission in Swatow, China, adding a handwritten note, "Am sending this to interest you and to make you pray that some good religious may go there." While she had no expectation that the struggling Chinese mission could reach out to Siam, she knew that Marie du Rosaire with her far-reaching missionary zeal would be interested in another plea for Ursulines in the Far East.

Rosaire, who knew nothing of Siam, read the long, detailed letter with growing interest. "In Siam at this time the instruction of youth is the first order of the day," Perros had written. Yet, he continued, the existing schools were not sufficient; there was need for much more, especially for a Catholic secondary school for young girls comparable to what the Brothers of St. Gabriel had established for the boys. "It is by means of these schools," he continued, "that we could influence the upper classes of society. It is a most favorable moment, for we are well appreciated here and many parents are asking us to establish a secondary school where they could send their girls." The Sisters of St. Paul-de-Chartres had several schools in Bangkok, he explained, but they could not extend themselves further. His request to the Dames de Saint-Maur in Malaya had also been without success. "In this impasse I have no other recourse but to find in America what Europe is unable to provide."

It was, however, the final paragraph that touched Rosaire: "In the missions of Canton and Swatow there are some Ursulines from Canada. I don't know if this Congregation has available subjects and could accept our offer.

I beg Our Divine Savior to help you find the necessary help for sowing good grain in a country which could produce a rich yield. In a little while this seed will produce an abundant harvest. It is up to us to sow it as well as we can."

Rosaire waited with eagerness to see if America would indeed provide the necessary help; when after several months she learned that Perros was unsuccessful, she assumed the initiative and wrote to him herself, suggesting that he write to the Superior General of the Ursulines who might be in a position to honor his request.

Perros on receiving her letter took immediate action and on January 29, 1924--just three weeks after receiving Rosaire's letter--wrote at length to Angèle de Notre-Dame. The first section of his letter was a repetition of his letter to Bishop Freri; the second section, however, provided specific details of the work in which the sisters would be engaged, as well as the living conditions that would be provided.

At Bangkok we have four parishes; one of these, called Rosaire, is Chinese and numbers about 2,000 faithful. The sisters would be in charge of the parish school where the teaching is done in both Chinese and Siamese. (At the beginning they could use native teachers while the sisters learn Siamese, which is not very difficult.) There would also be an English class for children just beginning this language and a workroom for manual arts--sewing, cooking, managing a household--everything necessary for the mother of a family. The most important, of course, is the formation of good Christians. For this, there must be both devotion and zeal.

As the work progresses, they will also receive pagans who will come to learn English, French, design, embroidery, etc., while at the same time receiving knowledge of the true faith. There will also be some orphans to take care of; and later a

dispensary will be added for distributing medicines for the sick who will come to consult the sisters.... The good that will be accomplished will be immense, not only through words but above all by example.

The work Perros described was daunting but, as he saw it, it was only the beginning. Clearly a visionary, he continued with a vivid description of what could be done not only in Bangkok but also in other cities of Siam, as well as in the rural areas which were just beginning to be proselytized.

For this immense field, he maintained that four sisters would be adequate for a beginning. He already had a place for them: a brick house with two floors, with a separate building for the kitchen, and a wooden house for the Chinese school--adequate for a hundred pupils! He would undertake the expenses of their voyage and maintain them until they were able to be self-sufficient. Although the parish school charged no fees, he explained, the sisters could augment their income by offering paying lessons in English, French, music, etc. "As you see," he concluded, "you have every advantage with no risk to run, since all the expenses will be paid until such time as you have enough to cover them."

Later that spring, without waiting for an answer from Rome, Perros wrote to Rosaire, thanking her for her suggestion and indicating that he hoped that if her advice was asked, he could count on her to support his request. Even before she received his letter, however, Rosaire had written to Angèle encouraging her to agree to Perros' request. "Bangkok is very rich," she wrote with her usual enthusiasm. "The Ursulines would have the task of teaching the feminine nobility and the ladies of the court, etc. What resources for the religious future...if St. Angela and her daughters undertake this work of evangelization."

Angèle, though impressed by the possibility, was cautious. Following the advice of her Council, she responded to Perros on March 10. "Everything you have told us is of the greatest interest," she wrote, "but at the moment it is impossible to give you a definite answer." She was not indifferent to

such missionary activity and had done her best to elicit interest by sending a circular letter to all superiors, enclosing Perros' request and urging them to encourage those who felt called to a missionary life.*

In early summer Rosaire again wrote to Angèle repeating her belief in Siam as a future Ursuline mission. Could not subjects be requested from England as well as France, from the United States as well as Canada, she suggested? She especially recommended that Bernard Mancel, a French Ursuline working in Indonesia, be placed in charge of the proposed Siamese mission. Although they had never met, Bernard and Rosaire had been in correspondence since the foundation of the China mission and a friendship based on mutual admiration had formed between them.

Born in Mortain in the west of France in 1874, from the beginning of her religious life Bernard had felt a call to the missions of the Orient. Her heart yearned for China, but since the Ursulines had no mission in China in 1910, she was appointed to Java, a mission established by Dutch Ursulines in 1856. Her interest in China never flagged, however, and when in 1922 she heard of the mission in Swatow, she wrote immediately to Marie du Rosaire, avowing her sisterly interest and support. Her exuberant letters lent fire to Rosaire's own dreams. Bernard's years on the mission had matured and seasoned her. Far from being exhausted by her fifteen years of demanding missionary life, her enthusiasm was only intensified at the thought of new worlds to conquer for the Gospel. Small wonder that Rosaire suggested her as the superior of this possible new venture.

Rosaire's interest in Siam was deflected that summer by a more immediate joy: the promise of four young missionaries for the China mission. Now as they began their third year with two mission houses established (Swatow and Chao-Chow Fu) such recruits were desperately needed. Bishop Rayssac, their ecclesiastical superior--and an irascible man in times of

* See Appendix A for the full text of three letters dealing with the foundation of the Ursuline mission: René Perros to Joseph Fréri, August 17, 1923; Angèle de Notre-Dame Lorenziutti to René Perros, March 10, 1924; Marie du Rosaire Audet to Angèle de Notre-Dame, March 22, 1924.

crisis--had lost patience with the apparent indifference of Rome to assist his rapidly developing mission. Now at last Rosaire was able to assure him that by the coming fall (1924) there would be four additions to the mission. When she wrote to Angèle on July 6 her letter was full of excited anticipation. "Please send me at once the date of departure of the new missionaries," she implored.

Since she had heard nothing further about Siam, she presumed that Perros' request had been denied. Sometime that July, however, an ambiguous note from Angèle came to her indirectly: "Tell M. du Rosaire that I have just accepted Bangkok and am sending four missionaries so that she can choose for Bangkok those she thinks would be best."

Presuming that these four were in addition to those already promised for China, it seemed to Rosaire that two dreams were being fulfilled at once: The Siam mission would become a reality and the China mission would receive its much-needed recruits. The General Council in Rome, however, had reached a very different conclusion. Unable to provide missionaries for both China and Siam, the decision had been made to use the four sisters originally destined for China to open a mission in Siam. It was a decision, however, that did not reach Rosaire until mid-October or Bishop Perros himself until mid-November.

The recruits, meanwhile, had been gathered together in mid-August at the Ursuline monastery in Tournai, in western Belgium, to prepare themselves spiritually for their mission assignment in China. The next thirty days were to be spent in prayer and silence, following the Ignatian Exercises, a regular part of Ursuline spirituality.

The four chosen represented three different countries: France, Belgium, and Yugoslavia.. Sisters Raphael Vurnik and Marie Xaveria Pirc were already far from home. Marie Xaveria du Divin Coeur (née Anna) Pirc had been born in Borovnica, Yugoslavia in 1894 and educated by the Ursulines in Skofja Loka. The Pirc family was well-known in Ursuline circles. All the girls had been educated in Ursuline schools and another sister had preceded

Xaveria into the Order. In September 1916 Xaveria entered the Ursuline novitiate at Skofja Loka where she made her perpetual vows in April 1922. Xaveria had always been a child of promise and enterprise. At the age of nineteen she had passed a government examination qualifying her as a hospital nurse and while still a junior professed she had received her teacher certificate for intermediate schools in Slovenia. Clearly she was considered a valuable subject for the foreign missions.

Her compatriot, Marie Raphael du Coeur souffrant de Jésus (née Marija) Vurnik, was born in 1898, the last of eight children, in Radovljica, Yugoslavia. Like Xaveria, her family was also closely connected to the Ursulines. Her father was a sculptor and a painter who had designed the altar for the Ursuline church at Skofja Loka. Her mother, having given birth to ten children of whom only two lived (Raphael and her brother Ivan), suffered from chronic ill health and when Raphael was twelve she was sent to the Ursulines as a boarder. The following year she experienced one of the great losses of her life: the sudden death of her dearly-loved father. She finished her studies, however, and at just sixteen entered the novitiate at Skofja Loka where she made her perpetual vows on October 24 (feast of St. Raphael), 1921.

The oldest of the group was Marie-Agnès de l'Eucharistie (née Marie-Berthe) Delattre from the little town of Polincove, Department of St. Omer, France. Born in 1890, she had first felt a call to religious life at the time of her First Communion, but as she grew older the anxieties of World War I and the demands of family life had absorbed her energies. It was not until she was thirty that she entered the Ursuline novitiate at St. Pol-de-Léon, making her temporary vows at Beaugency in September 1921. Although with less educational background than the other recruits, it was Agnès' domestic experience and practical sense which would save them during the first months on their mission.

The fourth member of the group had already had a taste of international life. Marie Thérèse de l'Enfant Jésus (née Juliette) Mertens had been born in Antwerp, Belgium in 1895. When she was ready to pursue her vocation

as an Ursuline, however, Belgium was in the throes of war and the Ursulines of England had generously offered hospitality to those caught in the war zone. Thus Marie Thérèse began her postulancy in Greenwich, England in June 1915. Following her reception, she traveled to Chudleigh in South Devon where the Tournai novitiate had been transferred under the leadership of the novice mistress, Marie de St. Jean Martin. Although the following year the province of the west of France was able to establish a novitiate at St. Pol-de-Léon, Marie Thérèse remained in England and made her perpetual vows in Greenwich in May 1921.

These were the four who had volunteered and been accepted for the China Mission. The oldest of the group (Agnès Delattre) was thirty-five; the youngest (Raphael Vurnik) was just twenty-six. Of the four Marie Thérèse Mertens was appointed superior.

Exactly when they were told that their mission field had been changed from China to Siam is not clear. One record indicates that it was during the third week of their retreat; but the date provided by Agnès Delattre seems more reliable: September 26, the week following the close of their retreat and just two weeks before they were to leave Tournai. The explanation for the change was vague: that China was in an unsettled state, that missionaries might be in danger, that it might be more profitable to preach the Gospel in a more peaceful and hospitable country.

If there was consternation or disappointment, the missionaries did not record it. If China had been their dream it had been an insubstantial one at best. They knew nothing of the country, the people, the customs, the language. Beyond the visionary ideal to preach the Gospel to pagans living in darkness, they had no practical goals. Where was Siam? They didn't know. The climate, the language, the work expected of them? They were equally ignorant. As one of them was to say later, "China or Siam? What difference?"

In such a spirit of abandon they left Tournai in the second week of October. On their way to Marseille they stopped at the Ursuline novitiate in

Beaugency and also in Grenoble. On October 23, just at sunset, feast of the Ursuline Martyrs of Valenciennes, the *Angers* sailed out of the harbor at Marseille bound for Singapore. In a letter to Angèle de Notre-Dame Marie Thérèse described in moving detail that moment of departure when, kneeling with their eyes fixed on the fading French landscape, they thanked God for his graces and begged his consolation for those they left behind. That evening they began to adjust to a long voyage in a small, airless cabin surrounded by forty-nine pieces of luggage.

Of that long voyage, Marie-Thérèse kept a meticulous account, writing each week to Angèle in Rome of the climate, the food, the various stops along the way: through the Red Sea with its enervating heat to Port Said, Djibouti, and on to Colombo. The tone of the letters, however, was less that of a travelogue than a spiritual diary. Marie-Thérèse (who began every letter, "Magnificat!") was a person both earnest and pious whose sole desire was, as she expressed it, to become entirely forgetful of self, profoundly humble, totally dependent on Divine Providence--in short, to become a saint.

This avowed longing for abandonment to the Divine Will was soon to be given an opportunity, for on November 9 as they arrived in Colombo, they received a letter from Marie du Rosaire from Swatow, dated October 16. It told them briefly that a mistake had been made, that in fact they were not to go to Siam but to China as originally planned. At Singapore the Father Procurator of the Missions would meet them and make arrangements for their voyage to Swatow, she assured them. It would have been a bewildering command for far more experienced religious. For these four, innocent of anything beyond the rule of obedience, it was totally confounding. With no other guidance available, Marie-Thérèse, anxious that she did not understand Rosaire's directions and fearful of making the wrong decision, sent a cable to Angèle begging her to advise her and to address her reply to Singapore.

For the next seven days the *Angers* sailed on while the missionaries lived in limbo, uncertain of their future. But on their arrival at Singapore a cable

awaited them: "Bangkok," it read and was signed "Angèle de Notre-Dame." With that assurance, Marie-Thérèse wrote to Angèle, "all our doubts fell away.... If you had told us to go to Swatow, Reverend Mother, we would have gone at once.... Tomorrow morning I will write to Reverend Mother Prioress at Swatow to tell her that I telegraphed to you to know where we should go."

Meanwhile at Swatow things were far from peaceful. Much of the summer had been spent in anticipation of the four promised missionaries. Beds had been bought, mosquito nets prepared, and Bishop Rayssac had begun the construction of a little convent for the proposed mission at Chao-Chow-Fu. But in the first part of October a letter from Angèle de Notre-Dame, dated September 14, reached Rosaire. It could not have shaken her more for it negated everything on which they had built their hopes.

I have always thought that the mission at Bangkok was something we should undertake. Since your last letter of July 29, I have prayed and reflected and here is what we have decided. We will found Bangkok with the four new missionaries who will leave Marseilles by steamer on October 23. They will then dock at Singapore and it is my hope that you will be there to welcome them and help them during their first days in Bangkok. I hope you will find it possible to leave Swatow for one or two weeks. I am confident that Thérèse de l'Enfant Jésus Mertens will have the ability to begin the mission in Bangkok, supported and assisted by you.

I am hopeful that you will receive reinforcements from Canada.... Please extend to his Excellency Bishop Rayssac the expression of my religious respect and gratitude. I am sure that his Excellency will understand that in founding Bangkok our intention is to provide a support for the house at Swatow and to create a prospect for vocations.... May St. Angela guide you to Singapore and then to Bangkok.

Rosaire was desolate but Rayssac was furious--justifiably so. He had, he raged, been waiting for these sisters for a year; they had been promised to him. His anger attacked Rosaire as well as the decision from Rome, and it was several days before she was able to talk with him rationally. When she could, together they came to a decision. She would write to the missionaries, explaining that a mistake had been made, and instructing them to come to Swatow. She would also write to Rome, explaining the reason for her actions and pleading with Angèle to reverse her decision.

Some explanation also had to be given to Bishop Perros and she wrote to him as diplomatically as possible, assuring him that other missionaries, even more suitable for his needs, would soon follow. "Our travelers will be advised to come directly to Swatow, where everything has been prepared to receive them," she concluded. "I like to think that you will do me the honor of assuring me that Your Grace understands the reason for this change--or rather the return to the original decision."

Of all those involved, Perros was the most confused. He had heard nothing from the Ursulines since the preceding spring when Angèle had assured him of her interest but acknowledged her inability to make a definitive commitment at that time. Then in mid-November he received Rosaire's baffling letter about four missionaries destined for Bangkok but now being deflected to China. Quickly on the heels of Rosaire's letter, there arrived a letter from the Ursuline Generalate, announcing the formal acceptance of the Siam mission.

I have the joy of announcing to Your Excellency that my great desire, to send Ursulines to Bangkok, is going to be realized. Four Ursulines will leave Marseille the 23rd of October, and will be at Singapore on November 16, aboard the steamship *Angers*. If possible the Prioress of Swatow will come to meet them at Singapore; she will bring the four new missionaries to Bangkok. Should Your Excellency not have need of four religious, she will take one of them for

Swatow. I am sorry that I was not able to advise you of this sooner....

Clearly Angèle underestimated the time it took a letter to reach Bangkok. The letter, sent from Rome on October 10 reached Perros only a week before the scheduled arrival of the new missionaries. This was followed in a few days by a telegram from the sisters, then in Singapore, announcing their arrival on November 25.

The bewildered bishop was clearly not ready for this unexpected development. On December 1, a week after the sisters' arrival, he wrote to Bishop Guébriant, Superior of the Missions, outlining his dilemma. Since he had not expected the Ursulines, he had no place ready for them. The best he could do would be to try to adjust the situation by moving the Sisters of St. Paul-de-Chartres from the Chinese mission school where they had served for almost twenty years and suggest that they begin another school farther north. Thus the elementary school with its predominantly Chinese enrollment could be ceded to the newly-arrived Ursulines. This, of course, would take time; meanwhile the new missionaries could devote themselves to learning the language. Perros, although delighted at the prospect of new recruits, was clearly harried by such sudden change.

As Perros busied himself with the necessary innovations, in Swatow Rosaire dismantled her hopes. By the end of November, a letter from Marie-Thérèse from Singapore, quoting the cable from Angèle de Notre-Dame, had been definitive: there would be no missionaries for China that year. Rosaire's spirit of obedience moved her to accept the decision but she balked at Angèle's suggestion that she leave Swatow to meet the new missionaries and help them get settled. It was simply an impossibility. The new missionaries would have to fend for themselves.

The missionaries, meanwhile, were having three days of respite in Singapore while they waited for the next available ship to Bangkok. The Dames de Saint-Maur who had offered them hospitality were kindness itself, but their hospitality could not entirely ease the discomfort of a new

country. Garbed from head to foot in their woolen habits, the missionaries wilted beneath the humid heat of Singapore until they felt there was no air to breathe. Given part of the boys' dormitory—momentarily empty—for their quarters, they found the beds very different from those of Europe and much too short for the tall frames of Sisters Raphael and Xaveria. Mosquitoes attacked them in droves and an occasional rat set their hearts pounding. But they were at peace, as Marie-Thérèse wrote, sure of their destination and safe in the arms of Providence.

One of the joys of that week, however, had been the unexpected visit from the Vicar General of Malaysia who brought them a letter from the Ursuline Community of Noordwijk-Batavia (Java) assuring them of their continued prayers and concern as they began their missionary life. The writer was Marie Bernard Mancel, that ardent missionary who had already served in Java for over fourteen years and who before her death would serve as superior in both the missions of Thailand and China.

Encouraged by this sisterly support, on the morning of November 25 they collected their forty-nine pieces of luggage and made their way to the wharf for the last leg of their journey. The *Katong* was a small freighter that shuttled between Singapore and Bangkok. It had only a few cabins and on this run the Ursulines were the only passengers. Although it was only five o'clock when they cast off, the evening was already dark--and they were soon to discover why. They had scarcely left the harbor when a fierce storm broke. "The boat was raised higher and higher on the crests of each huge wave," Xaveria later recalled, "and then--oh, horror--plunged down into a dark abyss until the next wave pulled it up again." For two days they rode out the storm, confined to their cabin, crawling from place to place, unable to get to their feet without falling. Suitcases and trunks rolled across the cabin floor while the sisters, unable to control them, did their best to slip out of the way to avoid getting injured by the heavy objects.

Occasionally they tried to peer out of their porthole but there was nothing to see but the buffeting waves and a small lifeboat. It was hardly a comforting sight for, as Xaveria recalled, "Who could be saved in such a

tiny boat in such furious waters?" On the third day as they neared the coast of Siam the storm abated. For the first time in almost three days they enjoyed a meal and even drank some of the red wine which the captain passed around. While thanking God for saving their lives, Thérèse, with her tendency to pious reflections, wrote: "Wasn't this a good omen? Hell was raging because the Ursulines were arriving in Siam!"

Of the final part of their journey, the trip up the Chao Phya River, the sisters said little. It was already dusk and they could see only dimly little houses on stilts with occasional smoke curling into the evening sky. Another traveler who had arrived on the *Katong* a year earlier provided a more graphic description:

From the river mouth to Bangkok was about 25 miles. Steaming mud banks, mosquito-ridden mangrove swamps, dense palm jungle, and behind them stretched mile upon mile of green paddy fields. Nothing had changed since the first explorers. This was the entry to the last Absolute Monarchy of South East Asia....

Small communities lived in dwellings that were entirely afloat, the only solution to the floodwaters of the monsoon season. Houses rested on pontoons of logs and rose and fell with the wash of passing shipping. In front of some were small platforms at water level. On these, shopkeepers displayed their wares and customers came and went in small canoe-like crafts. Occasional clusters of stilted Siamese huts gave way to continuous lines of solid wooden structures. As the banks grew more active, the river itself sprung to life. Crafts of every description were to be seen. Motor launches raced by slender sampans..Chinese junks,

with staring eyes painted on their bows, lay anchored near the steamboats.*

Night came suddenly in the Orient and when the *Katong* docked in the Bangkok harbor at just seven o'clock, it was already dark. From the deck the sisters peered anxiously, hoping to see someone awaiting their arrival; but there was no one. They waited as cargo was removed and sailors left the ship but still no one came for them. Beyond the ill-lighted wharf they could see nothing. They had no idea where to go. They had no address except for that of the bishop--no name to invoke. Finally, just as they were about to ask the Captain if they could remain on the boat until morning, they saw a flash of white on the pier. Soon they could make out a white cornette, a sister of St. Paul de Chartres sent by the bishop to escort them to their new home.

Leaving most of their luggage behind until morning, they followed the sister to two small carriages that brought them to the Hospital St. Louis. There the superior and eight of the sisters welcomed them. Under very dim lights which made everything seem shadowy and mysterious, they were led along the corridors to the part of the hospital reserved for the indigent. Here they were given a small room with four beds. For the next two months this would be their "monastery"--their bedroom, their study, even their dining room where their meals would be brought to them and where they would observe the cloister dictated by their Rule.

"We were in our mission; our dream had come true," Xaveria wrote some time later. It was two months--almost to the day--since they had learned that their destiny was to be not China but Siam.

* This description was provided by an Englishman who had arrived in Siam shortly before the Ursulines and who later wrote a memoir detailing his experiences. F.K. Excell, *A Siamese Tapestry*, London, 1962.

CHAPTER TWO

"WE HAVE LEFT EVERYTHING"

It is hard to imagine how the Ursulines conceived that dream in practical terms, for they knew virtually nothing about the country in which they found themselves. From the time when they had learned that their "destiny" was to be Siam, there had been neither leisure nor resources for them to acquaint themselves with the small independent kingdom nestled between Burma (with its English influence) and Indo-China (with its French). While other religious, less bound by cloister, would undoubtedly have spent their first weeks in visiting the city, examining the costumes and customs of the inhabitants, establishing contacts with other Westerners who could initiate them into their new life, the Ursulines appear to have done none of this. Under the guidance of Marie Thérèse with her tendency to strict interpretation, the Rule was put above every other consideration. As a consequence, in the two months following their arrival, the four missionaries saw nothing of Bangkok.

Even had they gone abroad they would probably not have been able to interpret what they saw, for Bangkok was a strange mixture of East and West, of sophistication and ignorance, of tolerance and despotism. It was one of the few absolute monarchies still extant, where the king, the Lord of Life, still had in theory--if not in fact--absolute power of life and death. The reigning monarch, Vajiravudh, was in the fifteenth year of his reign.

Educated in England, he was described by a contemporary as a "Victorian Siamese prince." The description seems apposite, for he, too, was a strange mixture of East and West. While he strongly advocated western advances in education, communication, science--and even in politics--he was determined that Siam would maintain a strong sense of its national identity and not simply ape the customs of the West. He recognized the value of western technology, however, and during his reign there was a spate of construction: railroad lines, telegraph lines, roads, bridges, improved ports, military and civil aviation posts. In other matters he was conventionally Siamese, objecting strenuously to imitation of western dress and social customs and doing his best to encourage his subjects to be faithful to their Siamese heritage.

Aware that his country was often regarded with amusement and disdain, he set out to build up a spirit of patriotism and nationalism. Hearing it said that Siam was a country "full of white elephants and not much else," he took the step of changing the national flag. The new flag was a simple design of red, white and blue stripes, replacing the original white elephant on a field of red. Yet for him nationalism did not mean cutting off Siam from the western world. At his coronation—a highly ritualistic solemnity, employing all the Brahmanic ceremonies of a traditional Siam—it was clear that Vajiravudh intended to adhere to the belief that the king was in some way divine. At the same time, however, he wanted his country to be recognized as part of a larger world, and with that purpose he invited representatives from all the major western countries, many of whom sent impressive delegations.

While on one hand the king was spending considerable money and energy in building up the Siamese army, he was also engaging a considerable number of expensive western "advisers." How much influence they had on his political position is dubious, for although he spoke of wanting to be an accessible monarch (and in many ways was one), he also wanted to retain his absolutism. While no longer upholding the ancient code that made death the penalty for touching the king's person, he clearly saw himself as the sole source of power.

In reply to someone who advised the establishment of a parliament, he wrote bluntly that he considered that such an assembly only wasted time with "interminable and useless speeches." Thus he warned young Siamese studying abroad to be on their guard against the seductions of western political theory, of accepting "democracy" without a careful analysis of its repercussions. Monarchy, he felt, was innately appropriate to Siam although he recognized the need for some contemporary modifications.

In one thing he was unequivocally determined: Siam would never be swallowed up by foreign powers as were the countries around him--Malaya, Singapore, Burma, to say nothing of the vast spheres of foreign influence in China. With the advent of World War I, Vajiravudh stood apart as long as he could, until the United States declared war on Germany. Then he acted at once, seizing German merchant ships off the coast of Bangkok and declaring himself on the side of the Allies. The move was not without self-interest, for as he later wrote: "This enables us to hope that we may be able in the future to enjoy every right and privilege on an equality with all the other nations."

For the newly arrived missionaries, the King's interest in education was the most relevant concern. Until the late nineteenth century, education had been considered largely the work of the Buddhist monasteries. From these, of course, women were excluded. By the end of the century, however, a Department of Education had been established with the guidance of one of the princes who himself had been educated in England. As a result, these initial efforts were under the direction of a large staff of teachers imported from England. Although these Westerners were treated with esteem, teaching as a profession was not highly regarded by the Siamese and the salary for native teachers was so minimal that it attracted few competent people.

By 1919 records indicate that only 20% of the country's boys were registered in schools and a dismal 2% of its girls. Even more disheartening was the fact that of those who completed elementary schools hardly more than 1% went on to secondary school. In a predominantly rural economy

this was understandable, but Siam was changing--albeit slowly--and Vajiravudh recognized the need to expand and enforce the regulations concerning education. In 1921 a compulsory education law was enacted and by the following year the number of schools had increased by 81% and the number of pupils by 96%.

Much of the educational effort had initially come from western missionaries. Although in the beginning they--especially Protestant missionaries--had exerted their influence by means of small clinics and hospitals, they soon recognized that a more profound and lasting impression would be achieved through education. By 1922 there were sixty-nine foreign mission schools registered: 40 French, 13 English, 10 American, 5 Portuguese, 1 Belgian. While such records may well be inaccurate, they indicate a considerable sphere of influence. According to law, such schools--like the state schools--were expected to conform to state regulations and be subject to governmental inspections. Such laws, however, like much in Siam, were often more a question of theory than practice, at least in these beginning stages.

But of all these complexities and ambiguities of Siamese life, the four missionaries knew nothing. Woefully ignorant--or gloriously innocent--they seemed curiously unconcerned by their lack of knowledge and experience. Their concern was only with abandonment to God's providence, certain that day by day--hour by hour--they would be directed in the fulfillment of their destiny. Thus they spent their first night in their hospital cloister and early the next morning--far from rested--they attended Mass in the hospital chapel. The Gospel of the day filled them with confidence: "Behold we have left everything and have followed you."

Later that morning Bishop Perros came to see them, apologizing for the fact that no convent was ready for them and explaining that he had been given to understand that no Ursulines would be available for his mission. Word of their arrival had reached him only a few days earlier and there had not been sufficient time for adequate preparations. Until such

arrangements could be made, he explained, they would continue to live in the Hospital St. Louis, the one Catholic hospital in Bangkok.

He said nothing about the nature of their work and was vague about how long they must wait for a place of their own. For the present, he advised them, their task would be to devote themselves to the study of Siamese. Although anxious about plans for their future, the missionaries, well trained in clerical etiquette, accepted the bishop's decisions and asked no questions. Perhaps it was episcopal discretion that kept Perros from explaining his difficult situation.

The school and convent which he intended for the Ursulines was presently administered by the Sisters of St. Paul-de-Chartres—the same sisters who ran the Hospital St. Louis. This congregation had been among the first group of women religious to work in Siam, establishing both schools and clinics. Their service in the elementary school in the parish known as "Calvary" had been generous and devoted over the years. They were dearly loved by the Chinese parishioners and it needed tact and sensitivity to suggest that they relinquish the school to these unexpected newcomers. Ultimately they agreed to Perros' suggestion that they expand their work by beginning a much-needed school farther north.

The Ursulines, however, who knew nothing of these complications, waited day by day for the bishop to reveal his plans for them. He saw them regularly, coming every morning to give them an hour's instruction in Siamese. In the afternoon he sent in a native teacher who did her best to initiate the four in the intricacies of the Siamese language. She spoke neither English nor French and the sisters struggled to tune their ears to the musical speech of this tonal language. She brought them some books--a small catechism with the Siamese words romanized and another book with Siamese characters. "We looked at these strange words and the pretty curlicues of the alphabet but could not understand anything," one of them later wrote. The written language, they soon discovered, was even more difficult than the spoken one with its forty-four consonants, twenty-one vowels, and multiple accents. The words, they learned, were not separated

from each other but continued in an uninterrupted stream with no punctuation. Hard as they studied, it seemed to them that they made no progress.

Thus they entered into the season of Advent, a time of waiting. The days seemed long as they struggled with the language and waited for the bishop to give them some indication of their future apostolate. They waited, too, for an encouraging and supportive letter from Rome, but nothing arrived except for the formal act confirming Marie Thérèse Mertens as superior. Their one Ursuline contact came from the faithful and sensitive Bernard Mancel who sent them Christmas wishes from Java, along with a package of little treats. On Christmas Eve they said the festive office, *In Nativitate Domini*, and arranged a tiny crèche in their room. The solemn monastic ceremonies which at home had provided a joyful focus for this great feast were all missing. There was no midnight mass, no choir to exult in the birth of the Savior; but as the festive hour approached, they sang the Christmas hymns they knew by heart--but very softly so as not to awaken the orphan babies who slept nearby.

Before Christmas Day was over, however, the meager joys of the feast were lost in their anxiety over Thérèse's health. For several days she had been unduly fatigued but they had blamed it on the difference in food and the unusually hot climate; but by Christmas evening, however, it was clear that Thérèse was seriously sick. Her temperature rose alarmingly and she was brought into the part of the hospital where she could receive proper care. By the next day, her sickness was diagnosed: typhoid--and of a very virulent strain.

It was easy enough to discover how she had contracted it. In the room next to them were several patients with typhoid fever. One of these was a young woman being raised by one of the princesses from the royal palace. Now on the road to recovery, she often had visitors who, after chatting with her, would come to see the new Westerners. It was, no doubt, an act of kindness, for none of the visitors seemed to understand how easily this highly contagious disease could be spread.

Now, within a few days, three of the four missionaries succumbed. Only Agnès remained on her feet. For weeks Thérèse lay close to death, her fever mounting dangerously, often leaving her delirious. On January 7, it seemed that she would not recover and Bishop Perros came to administer the last sacraments. Xaveria and Raphael fared less hazardously for they were diagnosed with paratyphoid--a bacterial disease resembling typhoid in its symptoms but generally not fatal. Even so, the constant fever sapped their strength and for the next month they continued weak and listless.

They were still far from well when on January 22, just two months since their arrival, Perros came to see them with an important announcement: all necessary arrangements had been made for their future work and their apostolate lay waiting for them. The following day, he explained, was the eve of Chinese New Year, a most appropriate day to introduce the new sisters to the parish of Calvary which served the large Chinese population.

The Chinese was by far the largest and most important of the foreign groups. For years they had been emigrating in considerable numbers to Siam where jobs were plentiful and life less onerous than in China. Willing to begin with very menial work, they soon raised themselves to positions of social and economic importance--marrying Siamese women and becoming easily assimilated into Siamese culture. They continued, however, to maintain their Chinese heritage and by the time the Ursulines arrived, there were numerous Chinese schools and a significant number of Chinese newspapers. Most came from the southern provinces of China. In fact, many of the emigrants came from the area around Swatow where the Ursulines had established their mission two years earlier. It was with this Chinese population in mind that the bishop saw the possibility of mutual help between the two missions. The nuns themselves must surely have felt it ironic that after all the confusion concerning their destination, they were to be teaching not Siamese but Chinese after all.

Their joy at this long awaited news was, however, tempered by their poor health. Except for Agnès, who had been spared the ordeal of typhoid, they still felt too weak to undertake the tasks the bishop outlined. Although a

kind man by nature, the bishop paid scant heed to their protests. He was determined that his new sisters be presented at Calvary at the celebration of Chinese New Year. It was a considerable distance from the Hospital St. Louis to Calvary and when Xaveria protested that they would never be able to walk so far, the bishop solved the problem by sending a carriage!

Even so, Raphael was not well enough to make the trip and it was Agnès and Xaveria who arrived on the morning of the eve of Chinese New Year to visit their mission. The bishop awaited them, introducing them to the two native priests and to Father Guillou, a French missionary from Nantes. They also met the superior of the Sisters of St. Paul-de-Chartres who took them through the small convent, explaining as she went the work that would be expected of them: dinner for the priests, the teachers in the school, the orphans; washing and ironing the laundry for the priests and for the church; making and selling candles--a project which provided financial support for the parish; and finally--classes. A daunting program even for those in excellent health!

The following day, Sunday January 24, Xaveria and Agnès went to Calvary for the second time--still without Raphael. This time they attended the High Mass celebrated as part of Chinese New Year, following which they were introduced to the congregation as the sisters who would be replacing the Sisters of St. Paul-de-Chartres. It was not an easy moment for either the sisters or the Chinese who stared at them hostilely. They had known and loved the Sisters of St.- Paul-de-Chartres; they had taken care of their children, helped them when they were in trouble and, above all, had understood their language. As for these intruders in their strange habits who understood not a word of Chinese--where had they come from? They were not needed here! The crowd began to murmur angrily and it took all of Pastor Guillou's diplomacy to restore a sense of calm.

Xaveria and Agnès, well aware of their limitations and recognizing how awkward the situation was, looked in vain for some of the Sisters of St. Paul to help them. But the sisters were not there. Apparently they had not realized that they were expected to be at this celebration and had already

departed, leaving the parish in the hands of the new missionaries. Their absence left the Ursulines dismayed, for they had counted on them to answer their questions and give them fuller instructions about their work.

But the little house was empty; even the orphans had disappeared. They were soon discovered--twelve of them, ranging in age from two to eighteen--hiding in the courtyard, covered with tears, fearful of being turned over to strangers. One of them came timidly to give Agnès the key to the house, but the barrier of language made every attempt at normal conversation impossible.

For the first time Agnès and Xaveria were able to examine their new home more carefully. But if they had expected a period of privacy and quiet, they received another shock. No sooner had they opened the door, than the curious Chinese followed them in, crowding into the tiny rooms, examining everything and carefully watching the reactions of the sisters. Whatever Agnès and Xaveria had expected, they must have quailed before this small, crowded house which was to serve as school, orphanage, and convent. On the ground floor were three classrooms and a parlor. On the first floor was a small office, a bedroom for the sisters and a dormitory for the orphans. There was no laundry, no kitchen--no chapel. The kitchen, they discovered, was a small shack across the courtyard; the laundry would be done in the open court. As for a chapel--the bishop felt that the parish church was near enough for their devotions. How twelve orphans and four sisters were to live under such conditions must have tested their imagination. How they were to maintain their sacrosanct rule of cloister tested their credulity.

By the end of the day, Xaveria--still convalescent from her bout of paratyphoid--returned to the hospital for a good night's sleep to prepare her for the work to come. Agnès, however, stayed on, to be with the orphans for the night. By January 27, feast of St. Angela, all three had taken up residence in their new mission. Thérèse, although having weathered her earlier crisis, was still gravely ill, often delirious with fever. Her condition

was so critical that it necessitated one of the sisters remaining with her each night in addition to her other duties.

Nothing had prepared them for the tasks that were expected of them; they were not only beyond their diminished strength but beyond their skills and experience. None of them knew anything about cooking and although three of the orphans were old enough to help, they were unable to assume any initiative. The priests fared badly in that first week as Agnès struggled to cook under primitive conditions and with food she had never experienced before.

In such circumstances, they had little time to prepare for what they considered to be their primary work: teaching. Vacation was soon coming to an end and the school was to open on February 3. The first day they registered twenty-three children; a few days later the number had grown to forty. Raphael had the task of teaching catechism--in Siamese! Xaveria and Agnès did what they could with English--beginning with the alphabet. A young Siamese woman taught everything else. In between classes, with the help of the older orphans, they cooked the priests' meals, did their laundry, washed and ironed the church linens--and learned to make candles!

Some time toward the end of January they received, at last, a letter from Rome from Angèle de Notre-Dame. They opened it eagerly, hoping for some advice on how best to deal with their unexpected difficulties. But the letter was dated December 20--before any word from them had reached Rome. Angèle's letter had none of the practical guidance they so desperately needed. Instead, it was one of simple spiritual counsel: "Always be faithful to your duty, to the Rule, and to the true supernatural life in fraternal charity," she exhorted them, assuring them of her prayers and good wishes for the coming year.

On January 29 Raphael found the time to reply at great length, explaining in full detail their missionary life. Their first concern was the health of Thérèse. Despite some improvement, she was far from well and the doctor

felt that her recovery--and even her life--was at question if she remained in this unhealthy climate. Bishop Perros had suggested that she be sent to Swatow. He had also warned that they must have a replacement if the work of the mission was to continue. It was not possible for only three sisters to do what was expected. It was, Raphael pointed out, the addition of manual work which made their situation difficult. Perhaps, she suggested, a lay sister might be sent to help them. At the hospital the sisters employed men to do this work for Siamese women were not trained to work outside their homes.

Their days were more arduous because of their living arrangements, she continued. Their house had been left in very poor condition and they had been busy trying to get it in better order. The bishop had promised that he would have the necessary repairs made and would also have the house painted. Their lack of privacy was another problem. They were located in the middle of the city, not far from the banks of a river. They were close to the street with very little property and had no garden or place where they could walk at recreation. There was a row of flowers in front and a little hedge in back along with some banana trees. Unfortunately there was a little door which was always kept open so that the curious and the neighborhood children were free to enter. Thus their situation was such that it was simply not possible to observe a real cloister. In addition to people coming in, they themselves must go out to purchase necessities as well as to go to the parish church.

They have tried to be as faithful as possible to their spiritual life, her letter continued. At present their work made it impossible for them to have Office together. The bishop would like them to have it in the church and thus provide a model for others. They always have Mass and confession every Thursday. She ended by protesting her unworthiness at being in charge during Thérèse's illness but accepts this responsibility as the bishop wished it.

The letter, clear, detailed, perceptive, written in a penmanship as exquisite as a medieval manuscript, was the first of many letters throughout the years in which Raphael analyzed with truth and charity the state of the mission.

Despite her advice, no change was made in Thérèse's situation. In fact, she was far too sick to be moved. By the beginning of March, however, her fever had subsided and she came to Calvary to join her sisters. It was immediately clear that the move had been precipitous. The noise and activity from the street as well as that within the house was a real torment to her and she was forced to return to the hospital.

On March 3, Perros, seriously concerned about her, wrote to Angèle de Notre-Dame. It was apparently his first letter since learning of the imminent arrival of the Ursulines. He explained at some length why he had not been prepared for them, and what he had done since to provide them with a convent and school. He could not have been more laudatory in assessing the new missionaries: "Let me express, Reverend Mother, the joy that I have experienced in the excellent dispositions of your sisters. All four are full of good will, joy, supernatural spirit--in a word a true missionary spirit. They are religious totally devoted to the interests of the Divine Master and are immediately loved by all who know them. I thank you with all my heart for this precious help."

As for Thérèse, he wrote, although she was out of danger, she was still very weak and the doctor has predicted a long convalescence. Although he himself had suggested sending her to Swatow, Dr. Poix argued against this because this was the period of heavy fog in southern China which would be very bad for her. Perhaps some other not-too-distant place could be found where the Ursulines have a house.

Perhaps on the advice of Dr. Poix, a cable was sent to Rome to expedite the request for Thérèse to be moved to a better climate. By March 15 a reply gave the requisite permission for her to be sent to the Ursulines in Java. Still hardly able to walk, it was clear that she could not make the trip alone and Xaveria was deputed to be her companion. Reservations were made on

the *Katong*, the same little ship that had brought them to Siam just four months before. At four o'clock on March 30 Thérèse and Xaveria arrived at the wharf. The narrow gangplank permitted only one person at a time and Xaveria, unable to stay at Thérèse's side, watched helplessly as Thérèse, too weak to negotiate the steep ladder, climbed the gangplank on her hands and knees.

Remembering the terrifying storm they had endured in the Gulf of Siam, they began their voyage in some trepidation; but this time the elements smiled on them: the wind was calm and the sea was as unruffled as a lake. At Singapore they disembarked and spent the night at the same convent as before. This time, however, they were not subjected to the boys' dormitory but were given a quiet infirmary room, fitted out with mosquito nets.

The voyage from Singapore to Batavia (now Djakarta) was even more beautiful. They threaded their way through "the Sea of a Hundred Isles," with the wooded forests and palm plantations of Sumatra on their right and tiny picture-perfect islands on their left. Far from exhausting Thérèse, the voyage with its fresh air and chance to take short walks on the deck improved her health. By the time they anchored in Batavia she was already stronger.

Waiting for them on the wharf "with her arms and her heart wide open" was Bernard Mancel. The convent at Batavia was, for the most part, Dutch, with a few French missionaries. But the travelers barely had time to get acquainted when the decision was made to take them up into the mountains to Bandung where the climate was cooler and less humid. A two-hour train ride, through dense jungles, brought them up to the plateau of Bandung--an ideal setting for Thérèse to recover her health.

Meanwhile in Bangkok Raphael and Agnès struggled with the daily volume of work. The bishop was well aware that it was far too much for them to manage, but he saw no alternative at the moment. He himself had no extra sisters to offer; the solution, he felt, must come from Rome. In fact, Angèle de Notre-Dame, even before receiving Dr. Poix's recommendation that

Thérèse be sent to Java, had written to Swatow explaining the situation to Marie du Rosaire and requesting that she go to Siam to assess the situation and do what she could to help the sisters. Apparently the letter--which must have been written in early March--did not arrive in Swatow until some time in April, long after Thérèse and Xaveria had left. At first, Bishop Rayssac still piqued over the loss of "his" missionaries to Siam, refused to consider the request. Finally, however, he consented and in mid-April Rosaire booked passage for Bangkok. The trip took six days, days of precious quiet during which she made her annual retreat.

On April 25 she arrived in Bangkok having sent a telegram to the bishop announcing her arrival. She was met at the wharf and brought to the bishopric where she found Perros both cordial and fatherly and lavish with his praise for the Ursulines who had remained undaunted through so many trials. But when she explained the purpose of her visit: to appraise the situation and see what best could be done for Marie Thérèse, he was astonished. "Mother Thérèse has left for Java with Mother Xaveria," he explained. For a moment Rosaire experienced exasperation--all these days of expensive travel when she was so badly needed in Swatow, and for what? But immediately she countered with her usual optimism: there would be great graces for her here and she would have the opportunity of getting to know at least two of the missionaries. As soon as she had breakfast she was brought to Calvary where she found Raphael and Agnès in the midst of their children. "The court was full of children--small, medium, and large," she wrote in her report to Angèle. They were children whose parents had come from Swatow and as she listened to them she realized that she could speak their dialect. For Raphael and Agnès it was a moment of total surprise. Rosaire's telegram announcing her arrival had reached the bishop only that morning and there had been no time to advise them of their approaching visitor.

For the next three weeks Rosaire remained at Calvary at the urging of the bishop, who assured her that Thérèse had almost recovered and was expected back the first part of May. This gave her time to observe the work to be done, the quality of life, and the dispositions of the sisters. Of the last

she had only admiration, astonished at all they were able to do. In the three months they had been at Calvary the school had grown to over one hundred pupils, severely testing the available space as well as the ingenuity of the nuns.

In addition, the domestic work was extremely burdensome. Agnès spent hours with her pots and pans in the primitive kitchen, cooking for the priests as well as the orphans. Although some of the orphans were able to help, they had to be carefully watched or they would spoil things. Rosaire, in her account to Angèle, strongly recommended the need for a lay sister in order to provide Agnès with more time for the school. She noted, too, that their present location was not healthy for they were hemmed in on all sides, and there was no space where the sisters could walk and get some fresh air during their recreation.

The bishop was aware of this, she wrote, and he hoped that in the future a better location could be found, although there was very little land available in that part of the city. Further, it seemed to Rosaire that, given the population, it was essential that at least one sister be fluent in Chinese--especially the dialect spoken in Swatow since that seemed to be the largest point of emigration. Since Angèle had promised that Rosaire could take one of the sisters back to Swatow with her for a year or two, she now saw that this would be not only an advantage for Swatow but also a necessary benefit for Bangkok.

She wrote freely and at some length, praising the work and spirit of the sisters but suggesting some changes which she felt were essential if the mission were to continue successfully. Meanwhile she waited with a certain impatience for the return of Thérèse and Xaveria. Although the doctor had recommended a period of three months in Java, in fact after six weeks Thérèse had regained her strength. When the bishop's telegram reached them, telling them of the arrival of Marie du Rosaire, nothing could keep Thérèse from coming home. They booked passage as soon as possible, and, after a ten-day peaceful voyage, arrived in Bangkok on the morning of May 14.

Despite the joy of being together again, one cloud hung over them: one of them, they knew, would return to China with Rosaire. Although in her report to Angèle, Rosaire had indicated that she would prefer Rafael who seemed to have a very quick ear for languages, in fact it was Xaveria who was finally chosen. While there is no written evidence to explain the change, it may very well have been precipitated by the fact that from the beginning there seems to have been friction between Thérèse and Xaveria.

In Thérèse, as the appointed superior, was vested the sole power to make decisions. But Thérèse tended to be of a scrupulous and nervous nature. Decisions did not come easily to her; she worried before they were made and was anxious in their wake. Xaveria, on the other hand, was free and confident, with a tendency to act impulsively and without proper concern for consequences. It was inevitable that in the narrow confines of their life, faced daily with decisions for which nothing had prepared them, these two would have found themselves in opposition.

Later letters do indeed indicate that despite their good will there was frequent tension just below the surface. Perhaps one of them--more likely Thérèse who felt her authority questioned--had spoken of this to Rosaire. Or perhaps Rosaire, with her keen sensitivity, sensed the situation and saw a means to remedy it. However the decision was made, sometime in the third week of May, Xaveria Pirc, so recently returned from Java, packed her suitcase once again and in a flood of tears left for her new mission. Although the original stipulation was that she would stay for only a year or two, in fact Xaveria would spend the next eight years in Swatow, returning to Bangkok only in 1933.

CHAPTER THREE

"PLEASE HELP US"

For the first time since their arrival six months earlier, the sisters were beginning to settle in. Xaveria had left them for a protracted stay in Swatow. Thérèse's weeks in Java had restored her to health and now she was ready to resume her role as superior of the miniscule community. During Thérèse's long illness and period of convalescence, Agnès and Raphael had assumed full responsibility. In those months patterns of work and prayer had developed and now Thérèse, who had never lived at Calvary, found herself adjusting to a structure which she had not initiated and of which she did not entirely approve.

There could be no doubt that their life in Bangkok bore little resemblance to the structure of monastic observance in which they had been trained. Office in choir was simply an impossibility; cloister was even more difficult with children and teachers having free access to their small house. They were obliged to attend Mass in the parish church just across the road; and, so far, the bishop had seen no need for them to have the Blessed Sacrament in the convent. Agnès and Raphael had had four months in which to accustom themselves to this regime but for Thérèse the shock was immense.

Thérèse, however, was gifted with a generous and courageous heart and when on May 31 she wrote her first letter to Angèle de Notre-Dame from Calvary it was with joyful élan. "It is with a heart overflowing with joy and gratitude that I write to you," she began. "Yes, I can hardly believe in my happiness to be at long last in our dear little Mission." But even in this initial exhilaration Thérèse could not exclude a note of anxiety. They had so little time for prayer, she lamented, and, despite her remonstrance, the bishop insisted that they say Vespers in the parish church for the edification of the faithful.

When she wrote again to Rome six weeks later, her need to have the Blessed Sacrament in the tiny space they had set aside as an oratory had become close to a fixation. "This is a sacrifice we cannot describe," she wrote, although she acknowledged that they had no appropriate space for a tabernacle or any of the necessary sacred vessels--"no chalice, no cruets, no candlesticks." But the deprivation had become a source of friction between Thérèse and Perros--a friction which would grow dangerously in the next months.

In August a series of letters variously concerned with the Siam mission was sent to Rome. The first of these, dated August 3, 1925, came from Bernard Mancel. It was a mysterious letter, full of hints and forebodings. A childhood friend, she wrote, now a missionary in Bangkok, who understood the situation there completely had written to her at length, confiding all the circumstances and difficulties of the Ursulines. "I am sending you this letter," Bernard continued, "but in order not to compromise his name I have erased it. This letter will tell you, Reverend Mother, what you have a right to know. Instead of returning it to me, please destroy it after reading it." Unfortunately Angèle faithfully observed Bernard's cautionary note and the letter was destroyed, thus obscuring forever its mysterious contents.

Bernard's letter with its ominous tone offered no further explanation except for a reference to Xaveria Pirc. "Sister Xaveria is doing very well and Mother Prioress [Rosaire] has only praise for her. As I have already written to you, she made a very good impression both here and at Ban-doeng, and

now I see more clearly what I could only guess at then. How fortunate for her that she has gone to Swatow. I pity the other little ones!" The implication seems to be that life in the Bangkok convent was increasingly difficult and that Xaveria was better off in China.

Whatever news had reached Rome--and through whatever sources--Angèle was sufficiently concerned to write to Perros as early as July 9, suggesting that perhaps it might be better if Thérèse whose frail health was exacerbated by the responsibilities of her role as superior returned to Europe. On August 14 Perros replied to her at length, acknowledging the difficulties but assuring her that the situation was not so grave as she had imagined. Thérèse, it was true, was of a nervous temperament with a tendency to exaggerate difficulties. But, after all, he reminded Angèle, she had been through a very difficult time, arriving in a foreign country only to be struck down by an illness which had kept her at death's door for weeks. Her weeks in Java, however, had been most restorative and she now seemed quite recovered.

During those difficult days, he continued, he had hesitated to name another superior since the situation seemed temporary but since he had to have someone to assume authority for the affairs of the community he had chosen Xaveria. She was, it seemed to him, the strongest character. She was very gifted, humanly speaking, and did not seem fearful of responsibility. She was quick and efficient and her health had not been so seriously affected by her bout of typhoid. She was in many ways the exact opposite of Thérèse for whom authority was a heavy burden. It was inevitable that under such difficult circumstances a certain tension should grow between them.

In fact it was Xaveria's decisiveness and independent spirit which led Perros to rely on her. During his daily visits to the sisters while Thérèse was ill, a number of issues had arisen concerning books and other school materials which they wished to order from Europe. One of the issues was that of a piano. In discussing ways in which they might improve their income, Perros had suggested giving music and art lessons--in both of

which Xaveria was skilled. The price of a piano in Siam, he had pointed out, was absolutely prohibitive and when Xaveria suggested writing to her mother to get the necessary information about having one sent from Europe, he conceded.

He had never expected these informal conversations to be construed by Xaveria as permission to order an expensive instrument. "All of this was said in a general conversation," Perros explained. "I was far from thinking that this would turn into an order without any prior authorization from me." But from Xaveria's point of view the conversation with the bishop was an authorization for action. At once, with her usual efficiency, she had written to her mother asking her to make the necessary arrangements for a piano to be sent to Bangkok. Unfortunately she did not immediately report her action to Thérèse, who at that time was still seriously ill. Later, during their weeks in Band-doeng, she did give an account to Thérèse; but the full import of her deed did not come to light until after she had left for Swatow.

Shortly after her departure, a letter containing a bill arrived from the company constructing the piano indicating that such a piano as had been ordered would cost 175 pounds sterling—with extra expense for shipping. Translated into French money this amounted to some 18,000 francs, an impossible sum for the mission to pay. The bishop, horrified, told Thérèse to decline all responsibility, avowing that such an order had never been his intention.

But the problem, as it turned out, was far too complicated to be settled by a simple refusal. The letter, addressed to Xaveria and sent from Ljubyjana on March 25, left little room for negotiation:

By order of Madame your mother, I have immediately ordered to have constructed a piano of first quality, according to the specifications in your letter of February 5.

The mechanism will be constructed by the Steinway factory which is first rate and which alone constructs pianos suitable

for the tropics. The structure will be walnut and ebony since these woods can withstand everything. This piano, a Model K according to the catalog that I am sending, will cost 175 pounds; this includes packing but not shipping. Please send this money to the Banque Franco-Serbe at London. With the arrival of the money, the piano will be ready for transport directly from London to your address.

At once Thérèse, on the advice of the bishop, had Raphael write canceling the order. But in reply to Raphael's letter refusing payment, a second letter, ominous in tone, soon arrived from Ljubljana:

I have received your express letter. I am sorry but we cannot accept the cancellation of your order for this piano which has been made specially for you according to the specifications you have given....This is a piano for the tropics which in no way I can sell here. You must realize that this is not an instrument which is sold every day; I have ordered the piano according to your orders and I am obliged to pay for it. My God! This is a sum which would ruin me! Who at Ljubljana would buy a tropical piano!....

Madame Pirc, mother of Sister Xaveria, came to see me today and she almost wept when I read her your letter in which you want to cancel what you have formally ordered....She is also going to write to you. It doesn't matter to us if you have canceled this order without informing her [Xaveria]; what is important for us is that she has certainly placed this request. The Institute is obliged to pay. Please let us know by express mail whether or not you have sent the money, so that we may take other steps.

To this ominous letter Thérèse herself replied, asserting that the order had been made without her consent or her knowledge and therefore declining

all responsibility. "We run a poor school and live on alms," she concluded; "where would we find the money to pay?"

All of these letters Thérèse meticulously copied and included in her letter to Angèle. It was clear that she was not at all certain that her disavowal of responsibility would end the matter. Bishop Perros, already in debt, was in no position to assume this further debt. All of this has caused the bishop severe aggravation, her letter continued, and Thérèse was clearly embarrassed that her little community--which she would like to appear as perfect--had been the cause of the difficulty.

In her fear and irritation, she blamed Xaveria for causing all this trouble by acting independently, adding that she had also ordered books from Europe which she had never authorized -- forgetting that for months she had been far too ill to exercise her authority. At the end of her letter--ten closely written pages-- she concluded: "Dear Reverend Mother, how deeply sorry I am and I ask your forgiveness for all the worry I cause you by all these troubles. My only desire is to be a fervent little missionary and always to help increase the harvest." It was indeed her only desire--to be perfect herself and to lead those in her care to that same ideal. Contradictions, failures, misunderstandings were hard for her to fathom or accept either in herself or those under her care. Her responsibility as superior was becoming an intolerable burden.

Rosaire Audet, writing to Angèle from Swatow in early September, observed that while visiting Bangkok she had found Thérèse "very nervous" and inclined to take her responsibility of superior too zealously; but, she concluded with her usual wisdom, "God will save her from all the difficulties that her inexperience might lead to." Even so, the situation in Bangkok remained a source of anxiety to Rosaire. In that same letter she commented that the sisters were so boxed in that there was no place for them to get even a breath of air without leaving the cloister. She worried, too, that they were working too much without a moment for relaxation. They were doing everything: supervision, care of the children, teaching, the kitchen. She recalled that at first they had done this in Swatow but at great

cost to their health. She recognized now that it was far better to pay a little to someone "to do the work which is beyond the capacity of a religious who is teaching....I have tried to suggest this, but I don't think I've been understood."

On September 15--just a month since her last letter--Thérèse wrote at length to Angèle. She began with her usual protestations of being solely given to God and the work of the mission, of her profound happiness in her vocation, of her humility before all the graces with which they were inundated--but it was clear that she was still burdened by anxiety over the piano. She had written several times to Swatow, she explained, informing Xaveria of all the details of the affair of the piano, but she had received no answer. "I can do no more but pray for her" she continued, "for I'm sure that when she seriously takes stock of what she's done, she will be very sorry. I already feel for her--poor little sister."

At almost the same date, Rosaire was writing to Angèle regretting the proportions of the misunderstanding and giving a favorable report of Xaveria's conduct:

Poor Xaveria has had great grief over the piano. I find that Mother Thérèse judges her too severely and puts more blame on her shoulders than is reasonable....She is too preoccupied about questions of money, it seems to me. It's a trial I've been through and I beg God to remove these anxieties....If I had \$500 I would send it to Bangkok....Let me assure you that the house in Bangkok will never put itself in want by paying for this piece of furniture.

As for Xaveria: Rosaire was generally pleased with her. She found her generous and very quick. Perhaps she sometimes showed a little too much self-confidence but she was devoted and apostolic. "I try each day to show her that before all else we are the daughters of the Roman Union forming one heart and one soul, so that it matters very little what our country of origin is....We can aspire to nothing more for the moment. The missionary

spirit is not acquired in a day; one must be merciful both to oneself and to others."

It was a lesson that Thérèse was still struggling to learn as she wrestled with the discrepancy between the ideal religious life in which she had been formed and the adjustments missionary life demanded. They had already dispensed with their heavy choir robes since the temperature made wearing them impossible, she explained to Angèle. She had also changed the daily order so that rising was at 4:30 since this was the only way they could have the Office of Little Hours in common. Despite her continued requests, the bishop had not yet permitted them to have Jesus' sacramental presence in their house. Their school was growing so that the nuns had less and less space for themselves. Even their refectory had to be used as a classroom during the day. Although it was not possible to have the prescribed procession to the refectory before meals, they have tried to say the *Miserere* and the *De Profundis* while going to their little oratory. Thérèse, it was clear, was determined to live by the book.

Although by early November the anxiety about the "tropical piano" had been allayed by a cable announcing that the Generalate would take care of the expense, Thérèse's dissatisfaction with the quality of their life did not abate and in March of 1926 she had written the anguished letter which had led Angèle to wonder if the Siam mission should be closed.

Whatever Thérèse's distress, however, never for a moment did she sanction closing the mission. Despite their difficulties, her zeal was undiminished. The new king, Prajadhipok, who at the death of his brother just a few months earlier had succeeded to the throne, had shown a strong interest in education. Bishop Perros, too, recognized the advantage of having a secondary school in Bangkok, although it was clear that the Ursulines were in no position to begin such a venture under their present conditions. Thérèse felt that if she could get permission to borrow money in order to buy land in a suitable location such a school would be possible. "There is an immense future in Siam....families are very large and the religious have the confidence of the parents," she continued with her unquenchable

enthusiasm. "I am sure that if we could establish a house it would be full immediately."

But Thérèse's vision remained hopelessly at odds with their reality. Some time in April she wrote at length to Bernard Mancel who had been appointed by Rome as an adviser to the new mission. Bernard, she knew, would soon be on her way to Rome for the General Chapter but, she pleaded, would it be possible for her to stop in Siam on her way? Or could Thérèse arrange to meet her in Singapore? Their situation was impossible. They had as much work as fifty religious would have in Europe. They needed at least three more choir sisters and three lay sisters to take care of the washing, the ironing and the kitchen. Yet they had no room for additional sisters. Because of the difficulty of communication, her letters to Rome had gone unanswered for a year or more. They had talked to the bishop about moving but his suggestions were all impractical and no better than what they had at the moment. "What am I to do? Please tell me," her letter concluded in a tone of desperation.

Although the meeting with Bernard never took place, their condition was alleviated by the visit of the Apostolic Delegate, Bishop Constantin Aiuti, in mid-April. "This first visit has had for its principal purpose to visit religious communities and their schools," Perros wrote in his annual report. "His Excellency was interested in every detail and has given very excellent advice."

Some of his advice was, as Thérèse recorded, a triumph for the Ursulines. He issued a set of regulations which included many of the points which Perros had been hesitant to grant: Mass would be said every day for the religious, the school would be separated from the religious by a cloister, meals for the priests would be prepared at their house, visitors would remain in the parlor until the superior was notified, revenue from the candles made by the orphans would be used to take care of expenses—a sum would be given for the maintenance of each orphan and also for each religious.

The success in winning these concessions was due in large part to the influence of a young priest, Father Chorin, Procurator of the Mission. "He has had our cause at heart from the beginning," Thérèse wrote the following month to Bernard. Perhaps it was at Thérèse's instigation that Chorin had already written several letters to St. Jean Martin detailing the difficulties he found in Bangkok:

Their establishment [the Ursulines] is totally insufficient for them....They were not born to be cooks nor should they have to be busy all day with the work of the parish. The meals for the fathers and their helpers should be prepared at their own place. The work imposed on these three sisters is beyond their human strength....As for the observance of your rule, it is practically nul for it is absolutely impossible for your sisters to obey it....It is painful to see how your sisters are lodged. Their present school is far from doing honor to the Ursulines and for me who have visited some of your houses in France and Canada, I must avow my sadness in seeing your situation in Bangkok.

His intervention with Aiuti has had some results, he averred, but far from enough. His suggestion was that a provincial or a member of the General Chapter come to Bangkok before any future plans were made.

Whatever Father Chorin had been able to do to alleviate the difficulties of the Ursulines, it had not been without arousing the indignation of Perros. By the spring of 1926 it was clear that Thérèse and Perros were already at odds. She was demanding daily mass for the three religious; Perros countered that this was impossible without sacrificing the needs of his congregation. She argued for a cloister such as their Rule demanded; he replied that in their present situation such cloister was not possible. Thérèse, exhausted and frustrated, began to interpret all of Perros' decisions as contrary to the Ursulines' best interests. In the letter to Bernard Mancel, already quoted, she noted that Aiuti had said to her in the presence of Perros that he would like the Ursulines to start a secondary school, that he

felt that they were made for higher studies. The suggestion gave her hope but she was fearful that Perros would not accept it.

Her former description of the bishop as "paternal and caring" had now shifted to "harsh and unfeeling". Probably both descriptions need to be tempered. René Perros had been on the Siam mission since his ordination in 1893 and had been bishop since 1910. He had worked hard, enlarged the seminary and encouraged new religious congregations. A man of judgment and experience, he was not used to having his decisions questioned--certainly not in front of the visiting Apostolic Delegate by a young man under his authority. As for Thérèse, Perros had been quick to defend her in the difficulties she had had but now he found himself dealing with a position so intransigent that there seemed no room for compromise. One is not surprised to find Thérèse complaining in a letter to Bernard Mancel that with the departure of Aiuti, Perros "has been very cold and stiff with us.... He will never do anything to give us more land."

The situation was not improved by a terrible epidemic of cholera which struck them during the heat of May. Once more Thérèse found herself back in the Hospital St. Louis. This time she was not near death but, as she explained in a letter to Bernard, "Our little room is so small...three of us and no air and no place where they could put me....How could we avoid getting sick when all the refuse of all the dirty people of this area are strewn out near us?" But instead of discouraging her, this latest assault only increased her determination to find land in a better spot and build a real school. "Perhaps you will say that it is impossible for three people to undertake this work," she concluded from her hospital bed, "but I tell you that it's very possible."

Some time that spring another major change was set in motion: the Chinese school now numbering about forty pupils, was taken from the Ursulines' jurisdiction and placed under the supervision of Chinese teachers. As Perros noted in his annual report these were years of increased Chinese immigration because of the difficult and unsettled conditions in "the Middle Kingdom". No doubt he recognized that the Chinese school would

soon be doubling its enrollment. In addition to supervising the Chinese school, the Ursulines had already begun their own school, offering courses of study in both English and French. Although it was increasingly difficult for the sisters to manage all of this, yet Thérèse interpreted the bishop's act not as an act of kindness but as a unilateral decision in which she had not been consulted. "After May 15," she wrote in a tone of exasperation, "we will no longer be involved in the Chinese school. It is now a school run by pagan men."

This decision made her more determined than ever to find land where they could build their own school. In May she wrote to Rome asking permission to borrow money in order to buy land. "For the future of our works in Thailand, please permit us to ask for this loan," she pleaded. By July of that year (1926) there was a general upswing in their position. The cholera epidemic was dying down; they had received permission to investigate the purchase of suitable land; the controversial piano had arrived "in perfect condition"; and--perhaps most important--Bishop Perros, shortly after receiving a letter from Angèle in Rome, had resumed his former friendly spirit.

By the end of July, with the bishop's help, they had located some suitable land--"quite fresh and open," as Raphael described it. Thérèse had immediately sent a telegram to Rome asking for authorization to purchase. Meanwhile she wrote at some length to Rome to St. Jean Martin, her former novice mistress (and now a member of the General Council), describing once again "the hole" in which they were living. As long as they were there, she repeated, they could not accept any recruits nor could they expect people to send their children--except for the very poor.

In August of that year Rome was engaged in more pressing and universal concerns than the purchase of land in Siam. 1926 was the year of the General Chapter and Ursulines from around the world were converging on Rome. Angèle de Notre-Dame had completed her second term as superior general and the first task of the Chapter was to select her successor. On September 1, following a triduum of prayer, a new prioress general was

elected: Marie de St. Jean Martin, former assistant general, and one-time novice mistress for the north of France.

Graced with an enthusiastic interest in foreign missions, she had a personal concern for the Siam mission because both Thérèse Mertens and Agnès Delattre had been her novices. Well aware of the difficulties involved both from letters from Thérèse and Bernard Mancel, as well as from Bishop Perros himself, one of her first acts was to put the mission under more stable and experienced leadership. No sooner was the Chapter over, than she appointed that zealous and gifted missionary, Marie Bernard Mancel, presently superior in Java, as the new superior of the Siam mission.

CHAPTER FOUR

"UNDER THE TITLE *MATER DEI*"

Hardly was the ink dry on Bernard's act of appointment before she was writing to Bishop Perros. Her purpose was not only to inform him of the coming changes in the Ursuline mission but also to pledge her filial loyalty:

Our Very Reverend Mother General having entrusted to me the charge of prioress in Bangkok, my first act, Your Excellency, is to come to implore your paternal benediction and to assure you of my complete devotion... I am sure that we will work together in this dear apostolic field, having the same vision and sharing the same desires to extend the kingdom of Christ.

The letter was far more than a formal acknowledgment. It was a diplomatic effort to repair a painful situation. It had become very clear in Rome that relations between the mission and the bishop had become seriously impaired. In the official letter apprising the bishop of Mother St. Jean Martin's election, there had also been an apology for the difficulties to which he had been subject and to which Perros had replied: "At the end of your secretary's letter she begs me to accept the apologies for the pain I have been caused. I beg you, in all simplicity, Reverend Mother, not to speak or think of it further."

But this painful situation was temporarily forgotten by the three Ursulines in Bangkok when, in the third week of October, they received word that Mother St. Jean Martin had been elected prioress general and that Bernard Mancel, their faithful advocate, had been named their new superior. On November 19 Bernard sailed from Marseille without ever returning to Java where she had spent seventeen years of missionary life. On December 13 she and her companion, Teresa Cito, an Italian lay sister, arrived in Singapore and nine days later they docked in Bangkok. "Words fail to express the happiness of that day," the convent annalist wrote. "At four o'clock in the afternoon, Mother Thérèse, accompanied by a group of the older pupils, went to the wharf to welcome these heavenly messengers. What a feast we had at the convent!"

It was the third Christmas of the Ursuline mission--far different from the first, which had been marred by their deadly attacks of typhoid and even from the second when it had seemed that all their cries for help were falling on deaf ears.

Now, at last, Thérèse could lay down the burden which had crippled her. She could hardly have put it in more capable hands. Bernard Mancel's years of missionary experience in Java coupled with her extraordinary apostolic zeal made her an ideal successor to Thérèse. At once she recognized the difficulties to which she had been alerted and within two weeks of her arrival wrote at length to St. Jean Martin appraising the situation with remarkable insight. "Through exaggerated acts, the fruit of inexperience and also of unfortunate advice received here at Bangkok, Bishop Perros has been profoundly hurt," she explained. He had been very paternal in his attitude until it became clear that his advice was not acceptable.

Thérèse, young and inexperienced, was too quick to accept "the bad advice from the procurator of the mission, Father Chorin, a young priest, the very antithesis of the bishop." In her effort to be faithful to the Rule, Thérèse had put the observance of cloister above every other consideration, insisting that Mass be celebrated daily in the convent, despite the objections

of Bishop Perros. "The Chinese," Bernard explained, "being deprived of Mass, which was said for three nuns and fourteen orphans, were annoyed and further so when the nuns stopped teaching at the Chinese poor school. We live only five metres from the Church! The Bishop said that hundreds of communions were sacrificed because of this."

Yet despite all the difficulties the nuns had done well, she acknowledged. "Our work, small as it is, is flourishing," she wrote in the same letter. Concerning one thing Thérèse had been absolutely right: they must acquire more property. "Then we will be able to establish ourselves in Siam and have all our apostolates," she explained. But she was convinced that this should not be done by closing Calvary; it was essential that they remain there and continue the poor school. In time their own apostolic works would flourish. "I beg you to let us remain here in this pagan country where there is so much to be done, so worthy of the Roman Union and of your own apostolic heart," Bernard concluded.

While it had taken Thérèse months to get answers from Rome, Bernard--with the ear of the new decisive, energetic general--was able to get necessary permissions in weeks. By mid-February they had permission to borrow the requisite funds to buy land and within a few days Bernard was out investigating possible sites for a new Ursuline mission.

By Easter they had found land with an existing house that might be suitable for their needs. Although she herself had very little financial experience, as she explained to St. Jean Martin, Bishop Perros who knew Bangkok so well was very helpful. His advice was to purchase immediately all the land they would need so that the owners would not be able to raise the price later on. He also advised borrowing the money in Siam even though it might seem more expensive. He assured them that he was certain that they would be able to meet the interest payments.

Bernard's other pressing concern was the question of personnel. The little Italian sister she had brought with her was trying valiantly to learn some French and Siamese. She worked hard in the kitchen--but Teresa Cito was

no cook! "Nourishing, appetizing food is so necessary in a climate like this," Bernard commented wisely. They would all be so much better if there were another lay sister able to take over the kitchen.

Even more important, of course, was to have sisters who were well prepared for their duties in the school. This year Agnès was in charge of the poor school, assisted by a number of Siamese teachers. This worked well enough; the real trouble was with finding teachers for their French and English courses. The Siamese were particularly interested in learning English and their English classes had swelled to 49 pupils. The French class, unfortunately, lagged far behind with only three pupils currently registered.

This lack of interest in her mother tongue was a persistent worry for Bernard. While she conceded that interest in English dominated in Siam, she felt strongly that the convent should be faithful to what she saw as its French heritage. Thus although she recognized the need for sisters capable of teaching English, she worried about maintaining the French spirit of the house should English-speaking sisters predominate. The ideal, she suggested, would be to have French sisters adequately trained in English. With this in mind she wrote an open letter to the community of Saventhem in Belgium:

I address myself to your French hearts and I say to you: Have mercy, have mercy on the teaching of French at Bangkok! Even more, have mercy on the French influence of our community, which in being a French mission should have a majority of its members French. Yet we are only two!

Meanwhile, despite the intense heat of late spring, Bernard redoubled her efforts to find ways of procuring the necessary funds to purchase land. In May she had an appointment with M. Polain, the Belgian minister in Siam. He was most interested, most encouraging--but provided no visible help. "I will close in assuring you of the confidence I have in your success," he

wrote to Bernard following their interview. Such confidence was flattering but not practically helpful. Bernard, however, was not easily worsted and on May 3 she wrote to a friend in Java: "With the express permission of the bishop I am going to write to the richest man in the world--Henry Ford. What audacity! Absolutely, but sometimes it's necessary to have it." Of Henry Ford's reply there is no record.

Although M. Polain had not been forthcoming with funds, he was able to provide some important information: by the end of May he had located a house belonging to an English Association which they were willing to sell at a very good price. It was in an excellent section, Bernard wrote to St. Jean Martin, near the embassies, with good air, and room for expansion. It was a wooden house, with no cellar, but constructed on poles in the Siamese manner. Fortunately it was in a section where there was both running water and electricity. A canal ran very close to it which gave it a pleasant atmosphere.

Bernard with her unquenchable enthusiasm had hardly seen the house before she was drawing up plans for its use: the part on the right, completely separate, would be for the community. On the left would be the boarding school. Little by little they could build an orphanage, a poor school, a crèche. With a few recruits to teach English and French they could begin a secondary school, as the bishop would like. This could be done slowly according to their strength. There was no other congregation here to do this work. She was sure that this was their moment. Please may they have permission? They could begin negotiations in August, complete the purchase in December, and perhaps begin school in the new term opening in February!

Bernard's breathless enthusiasm was endorsed more judiciously by Perros who wrote to St. Jean Martin on May 30 concerning the advantages of the property. "It is well situated, near the city, close to a street, in a section where the houses are distanced from each other, easy of access with a tram only 400 metres away." In the same letter Perros endorsed Bernard's concern for well-prepared teachers. There was, he explained, a need for

sisters with diplomas: "This insistence on diplomas will make you laugh, but we are in the East, in a new country, where people are very conscious of appearance...from the beginning the personnel must inspire confidence."

A further concern was the future of the poor school at Calvary. On August 21, Agnès wrote to Rome reiterating the need to keep Calvary open and especially to keep the orphans there rather than moving them to the new house. They were poor and undisciplined, she explained, yet very proud, too, and it would be very painful for them to live in a situation where they would not feel at home. Bernard endorsed Agnès' viewpoint but with a somewhat different slant: "If we brought our orphans to our new house we would have little savages running everywhere which would be the end of a boarding school situated in an aristocratic quarter, right in the center of the legations and not far from the royal palace."

Although Bernard was never insensitive to the needs of the poor, her vision of the Ursuline vocation was to establish schools of first quality that would draw pupils from the best classes of society. For Agnès, however, the well-being of her orphans was her first concern. even though keeping Calvary open would necessitate the sacrifice of her community life. Once their new school opened, the community would be separated, with two sisters remaining behind to live at Calvary and supervise the children. Clearly Agnès' heart was in the small house where she had begun her mission life.

A month later she wrote again to Rome, expressing her hope that some day they might expand their work and open a crèche. "Our mission is prospering!" she wrote. "Our little orphans are becoming more and more quiet. The biggest are the most difficult for they were already too old when they came to us. Discipline is very painful for them but they have their good moments too."

The decision to keep Calvary, painful as the separation would be, freed them to think more concretely of their new venture. Rome, having given permission for the foundation, now took the practical steps of finding additional missionaries. By September, Bernard received word that four or

five sisters would be joining them before the new year. Anxiously she waited to receive their names, hoping that at least one or two would be French. On this score, her hopes were to be dashed, however. Of the five new missionaries two were Italian, one was Dutch, one Belgian, and one American.

On September 20, 1927, less than a year from Bernard's arrival, a letter from the general government formally confirmed several of Bernard's requests: the new school would be dedicated to the Blessed Virgin under the title of *Mater Dei*; Calvary would continue with two or three religious; they could wear white veils because of the tropical climate; and French would be the language of the community.

Meanwhile in Paris six Ursulines gathered to prepare for their voyage to the East: Marie Gabrielle van Niewkuyk from the community of Grubbenvorst, Holland; Marie de Lourdes Simons from the community of New Rochelle, United States; Maria Luisa Geminati from the community of Calvi, Italy; Lorenzina Belotti also from Calvi; Marie Jeanne Terrace from the community of Saventhem, Belgium. And Kunigunde Bajczar from Budapest, destined for the China mission. The voyage from Marseille to Bangkok was fully detailed in a series of letters from Marie de Lourdes to her family, to her community at New Rochelle, to St. Jean Martin who had been her novice mistress at Beaugency. On October 21 they had left Marseille on the *Paul Lecat* in company with forty-nine other religious all destined for the missions of the Far East. They sailed along the coast of Italy, past Corsica, Sardinia and Stromboli and on to Port Said and Colombo, arriving at Singapore on November 16. Here they said goodbye to Sister Kunigunde who was going on to Hong Kong on her way to Swatow. On the afternoon of November 17 they boarded the *Kistna*, a ship of the British-India Steamship Navigation Company, for the last lap of their journey. They were the only passengers and they were treated royally by the Scots captain. Four days later, on the morning of November 21, they arrived in Bangkok. It was just a month since they had left Marseille.

Waiting for them at the wharf were Bernard, Thérèse, and Father Chorin, the mission procurator. They were taken at once by motor-boat up the river to the bishopric where they received communion and then on to the convent at Rosary. Marie de Lourdes lost no time in writing to her community, describing with some surprise how "nice" she found everything:

The house is much bigger and nicer than I expected. The classrooms are very nice. The chapel is about as big as the Blue Library in the Castle [the convent of the New Rochelle community].... Our dormitory is quite nice. There are five of us there. We have big beds with a canopy of mosquito netting. The beds have no springs, just boards and a light mattress about two inches thick.

In a letter to her parents and another to St. Jean Martin the same note of surprise was struck: "The house is much better than I expected. Of course for others I suppose it would be bad enough." Accustomed to the crowded dormitory and cot-size beds at New Rochelle, she found her present living conditions more than adequate. "There is nothing missing that I can see," she wrote to St. Jean Martin.

Bernard was exuberant over the new members, writing to Rome at once "to thank you for the lovely little group of Ursulines you have chosen for us....It's true, France is missing but it will come in its own time." At once she assigned tasks: Marie Jeanne would have charge of the kitchen; Gabrielle would assist Agnès with the orphans and the poor school; Marie de Lourdes would have a division of English; Maria Luisa would have the sacristy, surveillance, and give piano lessons; Lorenzina--who knew not a word of English or French--would do housework under the care of Thérèse.

December, a month always busy with preparations for Christmas, was doubly busy in 1927 as Bernard prepared for the move to their new home. It was an ambitious undertaking and even Bernard--despite her unflagging energy--admitted to feeling harassed. Money to purchase the new property continued to be a concern. Several banks had initially turned them down

but finally the Bank of Indo-China had agreed to endorse the necessary loan. Then, without warning, on December 12--just fifteen days before the date set for the closing--the bank reneged. It was intolerable to Bernard that they should lose the property that in her heart she had already claimed as their own. Desperate, she invoked the help of Bishop Perros. For two long weeks she waited--then, finally, on Christmas morning, Perros arrived with his "miracle": the procurator of the Paris Foreign Missions in Hong Kong had agreed to the requisite loan. *Mater Dei* was safe!

Bernard, always the diplomat and aware that the French Foreign Minister had also exercised his influence in their behalf, arranged an appointment with him shortly after the new year to thank him and encourage him in their behalf. In a letter to St. Jean Martin she explained that during her visit she had said to him, "Our house is French and thus has a responsibility for French influence. Our government should be happy, as other countries are, in helping us." Bernard, clearly, would leave no stone unturned in her effort to establish the Ursulines successfully in Siam--and to maintain a French presence.

That same week Marie de Lourdes wrote at length to her family about her impressions of the country. After only six weeks in Siam, she still saw everything in comparison with the country she had left. Her description was far from flattering.

I suppose you are thinking of Bangkok as a capital like New York. But one look at our main street would make your illusions fly. There are a few big stores--English ones--but the others can't compare with our Chinese laundry.... We have a trolley system but only one track. One has to get out at nearly every switch....The late king made some improvements when he returned [from Europe]. But the present one is not so progressive--he has too much to do I guess with his five wives.

It was a harsh and naive judgment, symptomatic of a western attitude that tended to conceive all values in terms of its own culture. Yet it came from a spirit which was both loving and compassionate for in the same letter Marie de Lourdes spoke of her sympathy for the plight of the poor and her joy at being able to work with their sixteen orphans.

That Christmas--the first in Siam for the five new sisters--was described in some detail by Marie de Lourdes in her letter to the New Rochelle community. They had fixed little packages for each of the orphans: a pencil, a notebook, some soap, some pictures, a game, a little dress. They had recreation together until 9:00pm, then Divine Office, followed by Midnight Mass. The Church was beautiful--full of flowers and with lovely vestments donated by some wealthy parishioners. The music, too, was surprisingly good, she observed, mostly Gregorian but with some strange surprises. The organist, who clearly knew no English but was impressed by the melody, proudly conducted his choir with the unseasonal hymn, "It is the month of our Mother, the bright and beautiful May" which he followed after the consecration with "My Old Kentucky Home!"

Christmas was their last respite before the additional work entailed by their move. While the newly purchased house was lovely, it needed thorough cleaning, repairs, and adjustments to suit the needs of a school. Daily Thérèse and a group of helpers traveled there to do the necessary work. At Calvary they were busy collecting furniture, etc. which this larger establishment would need. In this they were most fortunate, for Thérèse's sister in Belgium, eager to perform some good work which would obtain the cure of her critically ill daughter, filled all their needs: fifty beds, mattresses, pillows, sheets, spreads, towels, napkins, kitchen utensils, pitchers and basins, a large kitchen stove and statues for the chapel. Bernard's direction was obviously behind some of the items, especially straw hats trimmed with navy and navy blue collars and cuffs with a *Mater Dei* monogram for the boarders' uniforms. Despite her years on the mission, Bernard clearly thought in European patterns!

Meanwhile Raphael and Marie de Lourdes worked on a course of study for both English and French, for Bernard was determined that *Mater Dei* was to be a first rate school from its inception. Since Raphael had passed her Siamese examination the week before, she could now be formally named directress of the school. Finally on January 14 they received their formal permission from the Ministry of Education to open their school.

The final decision was now made that the opening mass would take place on February 2 and school would open four days later on February 6. Of those final days of preparation, the convent annalist wrote:

There was not much time for all the moving--modest as it was--and the installation in the new house...On the twenty-fifth [of January] began all the comings and goings with everyone giving the best of her strength and heart to this work. Our meager resources didn't permit hiring a group of coolies who would have quickly transferred everything...Every morning the missionaries left for *Mater Dei*, returning only in the evening--harassed but happy at having worked for the extension of the reign of Christ.

The first of February marked the day of separation...felt but accepted by both groups. Mothers Agnès and Gabrielle remained at Rosary and the other Ursulines went to *Mater Dei*...A sacrifice of separation for everyone, and, for the foundresses, the additional sacrifice of leaving their first work.

On February 2, feast of the Purification--feast of light--Bishop Perros arrived at 6am to begin the ritual of the foundation. First, the property was blessed, with the bishop visiting "every nook and cranny to drive out the evil spirits and make of this a center of light in the midst of the surrounding paganism." Then came the blessing and distribution of candles--a regular part of the feast--and finally he mounted the altar steps for the first Mass at *Mater Dei*.

But if February 2 was given over to ceremonies, the next three days were a whirlwind of work. The religious "vied with the workmen" to complete all that still needed to be done in order to welcome the children on February 6. "After a truly superhuman labor," wrote the annalist, "sustained by the powerful strength of fatherly Providence, everything was finished....The children can come."

On the morning of February 6, 1928, eight Ursulines were waiting at the gates of *Mater Dei* to welcome the forty-five children who arrived.

CHAPTER FIVE

"WE LIVE IN A MIRACLE"

On February 11 Bernard wrote at length to St. Jean Martin, using their new address for the first time:

Institut des Ursulines: Mater Dei
Ploen Chitr Road 529
Bangkok, Siam

She had realized her dream--but at great cost. School had been in session just a week and even the most uncomplaining religious was forced to admit that she was already exhausted. "I'll never forget those weeks," Marie de Lourdes wrote to St. Jean Martin, describing their move from Calvary. For weeks following Christmas the nuns had been working without respite, preparing the new school building. Then with hardly time to catch their breath, they were plunged into a full school curriculum: Prathoms (elementary grades), Mathayoms (secondary school), as well as a kindergarten. Although they had hired several Siamese teachers to assist them, the religious were stretched beyond capacity. A few months later Marie de Lourdes--again to St. Jean--outlined her day: Rising at 4:30; school at 8:30; recreation 11:45 to 1:30; class again until 4:00. At 1:00 she gave music lessons and at 3:00 lessons in typing and stenography; at 4:00 she took students to the trolley; meditation at 4:30; at 5:00 presided at study

hour; 5:30 supervised compulsory bath for boarders; 6:00 office and supper; with children until 7:30; 8:00 night prayer.

The work was intensified by having both a French and English curriculum available to the students. Although it was clear that English was what was demanded by the Siamese (43 students in the English session as compared with seven in the French session), Bernard would make no concessions. She felt a sacred obligation to keep French language and culture alive in Siam!

But if the new school--*Mater Dei*, as they now proudly called it--was demanding, the situation at Calvary was close to impossible. Here only Agnès and the relatively new arrival, Gabriel Van Niewkuyk, remained. Agnès, who never complained, admitted in a letter to St. Jean Martin that the sacrifice of separation was for her "more painful than life itself." Gabriel was struggling with the intricacies of a new language and supervising the orphans, while Agnès taught French and catechism in the growing day-school. "There is no time to be with God," she concluded. The best they could do was to try to recall his presence in the midst of their work.

Once again it was Marie de Lourdes who, in a letter to the New Rochelle community, bluntly described the difficulties at Calvary: "It is an impossible situation. There are 20 orphans to take care of; 64 in the school and 45 girls from the Chinese school of the parish who come for sewing, music, etc. They have no lay sisters and while the orphans help--it is not very satisfactory." When Gabriel sent them to buy ice, she continued, they sucked most of it on the way home. And another time she discovered them making the coffee with the water they had just washed their hands in. "All this drives Gabriel crazy!" she concluded.

Bernard was not insensitive to the situation and did what she could to ameliorate it, going every Wednesday to Calvary and staying overnight so that the two living there would not feel abandoned. They must have more sisters. Gabriel had written to Holland to see if they could send a lay sister

to help in Calvary and Marie de Lourdes had written to the Ursulines in Nebraska, in the western United States, to see if she could interest someone there. It was not, Bernard explained, that she herself was suffering from overwork but rather that she "cannot bear to see these young sisters constantly overwhelmed." Even so, she added immediately: "I don't regret the foundation--or its extension which has been made through obedience and in view of the future--for I am sure God will help us."

Their need for personnel grew as the school became known and they began to receive pupils from what Bernard described as "the better classes." She was delighted to enroll Paola Rossi, daughter of the Italian minister, who wished to study piano and Italian. They also had several requests for violin lessons to which she had discreetly replied, "The mistress for violin has not yet arrived." "We are doing violence to St. Joseph to get us a violinist and her violin--since at the moment we have neither," she wrote to Rome at the end of February.

Fortunately, they were given a respite with a six-weeks holiday following, Siamese New Year on April 1. But, as Marie de Lourdes wrote to her parents, "Vacation on the mission, however, has not the same meaning as vacation at home. We spent the last in moving furniture, cleaning and sewing and the present will be spent in trying to prepare for classes, fix programs, learn Siamese, teach special English, etc."

By this time Bernard had been able to appraise the members of her community. All of them were generous, devoted and prayerful but some did not seem adequate for the tasks they were given. Despite her generosity, Marie Jeanne Terrace, a little older than the others, often found mission life difficult. Maria Luisa Geminati had been teaching English but, wrote Bernard, "she cannot continue as mistress of English; it's impossible! She can assist but that's all. She is a good little sister but her English pronunciation is terrible....We cannot fill our house with sisters who cannot be of service." Thérèse Mertens was assigned to teach English to the little ones but even this minor responsibility seemed more than she could handle peacefully. The same nervous anxiety which had made her term as superior

so difficult still shadowed her. "She suffers very much from terrible fear," Bernard explained, "although she says she is happy here." Thérèse herself was painfully aware of her difficulty and wrote some time later to St. Jean, "I will not hide from you the fact that I have lost courage before all these tasks....I have repented and abandoned myself completely to the Blessed Virgin."

Bernard's greatest problem, however, was Lorenzina Belotti who had arrived the preceding November. Her mind seemed disordered, Bernard wrote to Rome--and well it may have been since she knew neither English, French nor Siamese. Not only was she unable to follow directions but she was totally isolated from the life of the community. "My great fear," Bernard continued, "is that she will lose her head entirely....the tropical sun is very bad for her." She would probably do better in another mission. Two months later in answer to her concern, Bernard received word from Rome that Lorenzina could be transferred to Swatow. It was not a solution that won Bernard's unqualified approval. The political situation in China was at best volatile, she pointed out; the prioress was going to be away for some time, and Lorenzina was hardly competent to learn Chinese. But Bernard's hesitation made little impression and before the end of 1928 Lorenzina was taken to the wharf and put aboard the steamship on which she made the eight-day trip to China completely alone.

On May 19, shortly after the new school term had begun, they received a new recruit. Sister Marie Thérèse Matthieu, French by birth, came to them from the missions of Java. She had been appointed assistant superior at *Mater Dei* and as such was joyfully welcomed; but her presence did nothing to fill their need for someone competent to teach English. On June 9 Bernard wrote to Xavier Marteau in Rome, "I beg you on both knees, please find us an English sister, or if not that then a French sister who speaks English very well. This is an absolute need for us." She acknowledged that Siam was a difficult mission. They had so many things against them: the climate, their poverty. They lived very poorly: "no milk--except what comes in cans--no butter, very little bread; but we can always

provide eggs," and, she asserted, she would do her very best to provide necessary nourishment for recruits.

Soon, however, the climate and their impoverished diet took their toll. In July Gabriel, who from the first had had difficulty in adjusting to the country, was hospitalized with what the doctors feared was typhoid. Her condition was complicated by the fact that she had once suffered from hepatitis. Now her liver was not functioning properly and there was serious concern for her life. The loss of even one person caused dramatic changes in their work and Bernard immediately transferred Maria Luisa to Calvary to be with Agnès. It was the best she could do although she recognized that the timid and passive Maria Luisa could not give Agnès the support she needed.

More and more Bernard was coming to recognize that only sisters with excellent health--both physical and psychological--as well as a profound spirit of faith could sustain the difficulties of the Siam mission. To a sister she had known in the novitiate (now fifty-five years old) who wrote offering to come to Siam, Bernard replied forthrightly: "Don't think that you will gather souls as you would grains of wheat....Our work is hard and without consolations. We plant in tears." Even the hardiest were not spared their trials and Bernard noted that Marie de Lourdes--always so generous, so optimistic and mature--was suffering from a period of sadness. Fortunately she was helped by being able to talk freely to Bishop Perros--an opportunity which Bernard made available as often as possible.

The community relationship with Bishop Perros was now all that Bernard had hoped for; she found him a true pastor and he, on his part, had the greatest admiration for the new superior. On August 6, he wrote at length to St. Jean Martin to congratulate her on her Silver Jubilee and to give her an account of the mission as he found it:

I have good news to give you concerning your foundation in Siam. After the first days when the public "waited to see," the pupils began to come and their number grows constantly;

there are already more than a hundred registered of which fifteen are boarders. The spirit of the house is very good, the children are happy, the parents observe this joyfully, and its good name is expanding more and more. Soon we will be short of space, above all for the boarders, and we are going to have to think about enlarging our present place....

But--and this is the most important point at present: the personnel is not sufficient; we have great need of help. The sisters are devoted to their work and I am forced to moderate their good will in insisting that they get enough rest; the hours of sleep which suffice in the west are not enough in this climate. Reverend Mother Bernard is succeeding very well: her authority is at once both firm and gentle. She is a living model of religious life and of apostolic work; we have in her an excellent superior and I am profoundly grateful to you for having given her to us.

Not that we are spared our trials. The health of several of the sisters has suffered—but not gravely—and we have had some difficulty in getting instructors for the Siamese language. But for those of us who are used to mission life, there is nothing startling in these little contradictions in God's work. All the pain disappears when one casts it all into the heart of our divine Savior.*

Perros' letter was a remarkable testament to what Bernard had been able to accomplish in less than two years. In place of the three anxious sisters who welcomed her to Calvary in December of 1926, the Ursuline mission now consisted of ten sisters with two more on their way. A new school had been opened while maintaining the original work. Perhaps most important of all, the rift with the bishop had been healed so that he now considered

* See Appendix B for the full text of this letter: René Perros to St. Jean Martin, August 6, 1928.

himself their prime advocate and support. With Perros solidly behind her, Bernard wrote to Rome in November 1928 asking permission to build an adequate dormitory for their growing number of boarders. They have had requests for additional boarders, she explained, and the bishop has said they "absolutely cannot refuse a child."

During that summer they had received word that they could expect two new missionaries by the end of 1928; but this joy was tempered by the loss of Gabriel whose health had not recovered sufficiently for her to continue on the mission, and toward the end of October she was forced to return to Holland. At 10a.m. on November 19, the new missionaries—Teresita Lightwood and Marguerite Marie Penn—arrived from Singapore. Teresita was small enough to be Siamese. Not quite five feet tall, she had entered the Ursulines at Upton, England when she was just sixteen. She had made her perpetual vows in August 1928 and at once had offered herself for the missions. Marguerite Marie was from the Dutch province and had entered the community of Venray in 1918. Her perpetual vows had been deferred for several years, however, as the Venray community prepared to join the Roman Union. Finally in April 1927 she had made her permanent commitment and at once volunteered for the missions.

Teresita was immediately given charge of the kitchen and Marguerite Marie began classes at *Mater Dei*. Yet despite these additions there seemed to be no alleviation of work. Calvary, too, struggled along with more demands being made on them. The parish priest, Father Guillou, would like the sisters to become engaged in parish work, they were told; to which request Bernard gave a resounding, No! She was already concerned about Agnès who was beginning to show the effects of four years of unrelenting labor. She was anemic and very nervous and one day terrified them all when large black patches appeared on her hands. Bernard was sure it was leprosy--a disease easy to contract in Siam; but the doctor assured them that it was simply a skin disease which could be cured with medication.

Since they were getting an increasing number of Italian children at *Mater Dei*, Maria Luisa was now pulled in two directions—teaching English to the Italians at *Mater Dei* in the morning and helping Agnès with the orphans at Calvary in the afternoon. Whenever possible, Bernard tried to lighten the burden at Calvary by having one or two sisters go there to spend a day or a part of a day. Here almost all the children were Catholic and from a background far simpler and poorer than those at *Mater Dei*. Despite the work, it was a pleasant atmosphere, as Marie de Lourdes wrote to her parents that October:

I am writing this letter in a classroom in the presence of 15 children at play, and you should hear them! I love the work here with the poor children; it is always a sacrifice when I have to go back to the "princesses." [This] is a mission after the fashion of the pictures you see in the magazines. *Mater Dei* is run on the style of Merici School [in New Rochelle]; only the pagans make it impossible to have the warm religious atmosphere we have at home. At first it was hard to get used to this but I have long since realized that words and works count for little in this work in comparison with the power of prayer.

They began the new year--1929--with joyful expectation of a visit from St. Jean Martin, their Superior General, but soon they learned that she had made a decision to visit North America instead. Although Bernard very much wanted an official visitor to survey the mission, she responded negatively to the suggestion of someone from Indonesia. This would be useless, she averred; they would not know the language and would not be able to speak to the priests. Her real fear, however, was that they might not accept the Siamese quality of the mission and would try to fashion a mission like Java. "Java has difficulty in accepting anything that is not Dutch," she concluded, continuing that she was piqued at them for not offering more material help to the Siam mission.

While Bernard was preoccupied by their financial state and the care of the sisters, Raphael, now official head of the school, was primarily concerned with how they were carrying out their educational mission. In January of 1929 she wrote a long and detailed letter to St. Jean about the condition of the school. Earnest and judicious, she listed her concerns for the children as well as for the teachers.

The greatest problem, she explained, seemed to her to be that of offering full curriculum in both French and English. They did not have adequate personnel for this and she considered it unfair to accept students unless they could provide what they were led to expect. It was also unfair to the teachers who were so overworked that they could not prepare their work or correct the pupils' papers adequately.

One of the problems, of course, was the mix of language and cultures as Marie de Lourdes indicated in a letter to her parents in the spring of 1929:

Our school is a real Siamese puzzle. To watch the children pass reminds me of Adam in the garden of paradise when Almighty God has all the animals pass before him--two of each kind. In the class of our little ones, first comes a lively little Italian, partner to a mischievous little English boy, followed by four lads from Denmark, a little American from Cleveland, a little Indian with his queer little dark features and bright blue satin trousers and white blouse. Besides these we have a little French boy and girl and Chinese, Anamites and Siamese. The big girls come to us some knowing English and no Siamese, others knowing Siamese and little English and we have had Chinese knowing neither Siamese nor English. Can't you picture us trying to grade them!

It was small wonder that with such a diversified group Raphael was concerned about the quality of their teaching. Unlike Bernard with her tendency to throw herself into whatever cause seemed worthy--sometimes

without taking sufficient stock of their resources--Raphael was measured and balanced in her opinions, carefully examining both the goal and the means. For the next six years they were to balance each other in positions of authority.

Between Raphael's measured concern and Bernard's importunate pleas, Rome became convinced of the need for further personnel and on Thursday June 5, 1929--vigil of the feast of the Sacred heart--four Ursulines arrived in Bangkok. It was exactly the mixture Bernard had hoped for: two French and two English. Gemma Feeney, the oldest of the four, had been born in Kilkenny, Ireland, in 1893, and had studied at the Royal College of Music. During the war she had worked in the ambulance corps and in 1916 was given the St. John's Ambulance Medal to honor her work. The following year she entered the Ursuline convent in Crewe, a foundation in northwest England begun by French exiles from Rouen in 1907. Here she made her perpetual vows in May 1922, then becoming novice mistress and superior at Oxford before volunteering for the Siamese mission in 1929. Of Francis Xavier Johnson, the second English sister, there is little information except that she had made her temporary vows shortly before coming out to Bangkok.

Bernadette Farget had also not yet made her perpetual vows. Born in Aubigny in 1905, she had entered the novitiate in Tournai at the age of twenty and had made her temporary vows at Beaugency in 1927. The fourth sister was Veronique Poutrain, born in 1904 in the little town of Croisilles (Pas de Calais) which had been totally destroyed during World War I. She had entered the novitiate in L'Arbaletière in 1923 and made her perpetual vows in Arras on April 4, 1929, leaving for Bangkok just a month later.

The four were all Bernard had hoped for: young, well-prepared, energetic and enthusiastic. Gemma, Véronique and Francis she placed at *Mater Dei* and Bernadette, who had already indicated her initiative and determination, was sent to Rosary to assist the over-burdened Agnès.

That August the community learned that Bernard had been reappointed as prioress and Thérèse Mattieu would continue as assistant, secretary and admonitrix. Thérèse Mertens would be procurator and Raphael would continue as Mistress General. Gemma, Bernard decided, would be given the office of Mistress of Studies. Although she had considered Marie de Lourdes Simons for this position, she had finally concluded: "she is all right for teaching but too timid to take over the school. Anyway, she is an American and the people would prefer an English person."

Bernard's disappointment over not having a visit from St. Jean Martin was mitigated by the news that in the following spring (1930) Mother Marie-Roseline Hérand, the Secretary General, and Mother Xavier Dutting, also of the General Council, would be coming to visit the missions of the East. The physical conditions at Rosary were still a matter of irritation with Bernard, and she wrote to Xavier Marteau, then in Galveston, Texas, with St. Jean Martin, "I am dying to see the consternation of Mother Roseline when she sees how our mothers are living at Calvary."

In fact, shortly after their visitation, things changed dramatically at Calvary. On April 30 Bernard wrote to Rome that plans were moving ahead for the land at Calvary to be taken over by the Bank of Siam with the bank paying full value for the property. In fact, she considered this an excellent move since the income would enable the Church (which owned the land) to buy property and construct a more suitable building in a better location. Meanwhile, the orphans had been accepted by the Sisters of St. Paul-de-Chartres and for the time being Agnès and Maria Luisa were living at *Mater Dei* and traveling to Calvary by car every morning. "Much better so," Bernard concluded, who had always worried about the rift in the community.

Bernadette, however, who was no longer needed to supervise the orphans, found the change a painful privation. In a letter to St. Jean Martin, she wrote:

I can't hide from you, Reverend Mother, that I suffered very much in seeing our orphans leave....Easter Monday I came here to *Mater Dei* where a very different work awaits me....When nostalgia for my poor little ones comes over me, I remember my motto: smile for everything, in spite of everything. I am very happy to be here where God wants me.

Even had things not changed at Calvary, it was likely that Bernadette would have been recalled to *Mater Dei*, for that summer she was preparing to make her perpetual vows. During July and August she followed all the profession exercises of the Congregation of Paris and on August 31 she began her eight-day retreat to prepare for her profession--the first in Siam--which was to take place on September 10.

There had been no hesitation about admitting Bernadette to this solemn act; the other sister under temporary vows--Francis Xavier Johnson--did not fare so well. Bernard's plans for her to assume the burden of teaching English had met with disappointment. Docile and spiritual, as Francis seemed, she made it clear from the start that she had a strong aversion to teaching. "She is making me very anxious," Bernard wrote, for in addition to her fear of the classroom Francis seemed to have serious doubts about her religious vocation. "I do all that I can to help her but if this continues she must write to you herself and open her heart," Bernard confided to St. Jean Martin.

October was a markedly busy month at *Mater Dei*. On October 10 Prince Damrong and his entourage came to visit the school where his two daughters were pupils. He had recently returned from Europe where he had had an audience with the Holy Father and presented the nuns with a rosary blessed by the Pope in gratitude for the excellent education they were providing. His visit was not only a singular honor but would, Bernard hoped, help to make their school appreciated by the upper classes.

As they approached the third anniversary of *Mater Dei*, they had everything to be grateful for. With the split in the community healed with the closing of the orphanage at Calvary, they now numbered together sixteen sisters. The registration at *Mater Dei* was well over one hundred with the number of boarders increasing each term. Lorenzina had been transferred to China where Bernard hoped she would be happy. Bernadette had made her perpetual vows with all the liturgical splendor they could muster. Agnes had three young girls at Calvary who were interested in becoming lay sisters and at *Mater Dei* one of their most prominent Siamese pupils, Lucie Dardarananda, was also showing signs of an Ursuline vocation.

Problems, of course, remained. Their financial situation--despite the success of the school--was precarious. "We live suspended in the hand of the Divine Goodness," Bernard wrote to St. Jean Martin. "Blind trust....we live in a miracle...but God is so good!" The school was still not adequately staffed. Francis Xavier's vocation was becoming more problematic. Thérèse Matthieu had had to return home because of her health, thus leaving Bernard without an assistant. Yet when she reflected on what she had found at her arrival in December of 1926 (the wretched conditions under which the three sisters and the orphans were forced to live; the inhuman pressure of work; the hostility between the sisters and the bishop) and saw what had been accomplished in the next four years, it seemed to her almost miraculous. So much in so short a time! The very thought sent her natural optimism spiraling upward. The whole mission field of Siam lay before them. What might this infinite God not accomplish in the years ahead!

CHAPTER SIX

"THE HOUSE OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN"

The year 1931 opened on a note of joyful hope as the community prepared to accept its first Thai vocation: Lucie Dardarananda. Born in Bangkok in 1912 of a profoundly Christian family, she had been a pupil of the Ursulines since the opening of *Mater Dei*. Although now only eighteen years old, she seemed to have no hesitation about her religious vocation. Nor was there hesitation on the part of the sisters. "Little Lucie," as the convent annalist called her, received their unqualified approval. The hesitation was in the question of where she would best make her novitiate.

This was a question which had already presented itself in Swatow, but there the recommendation from Rome that novices be sent to the novitiate for the province of the north of France at Beaugency had been strongly countered. Surely, they had argued, native vocations should best be formed in their own culture. Their voices were unanimous and ultimately they had won the right to establish their own novitiate in China.

In Siam, however, there seemed to be general agreement that Lucie be sent abroad. Bernard, of course, favored Beaugency; Gemma, with her practical sense, thought she should be sent to a warmer climate where she would be spared the hardship of a damp French winter. The strongest voice for Beaugency came from Marie de Lourdes who wrote a long and persuasive

letter to St. Jean Martin. The spiritual advantages far outweighed the disadvantage of climate, she argued. Lucie knew very little French and this was of primary importance for her as an Ursuline "since French, after all, is an entrée into the writings of the Order." Elaborating on the supreme joys of her own novitiate at Beaugency, she concluded with a dogmatic flourish: "Everyone knows that a French novitiate is best!"

By mid-January the decision had been made and on March 21, Lucie (soon to be known as Marie Joseph) set sail for France in the company of a Protestant family well known to the nuns. In a letter written back to *Mater Dei*, Lucie narrated how a man on the boat had tried to dissuade her from following her vocation. But Lucie was firm in her resolve, adding that she easily forgave the gentleman for his impertinent questions because "he did not know God."

On the very day that Lucie Dardarananda set sail for France, Bernard received a letter from Rome that would forever alter the Ursuline mission in Siam. Seven weeks earlier on February 2, the third anniversary of *Mater Dei*, Bishop Perros came to pay a visit to Bernard Mancel. He was accompanied by a young priest, George Mirabel, also a member of the Missions Etrangères de Paris, who was presently in charge of evangelization in the north of Siam. Perros made the purpose of his visit clear and direct: would the Ursulines accept his proposal to begin a foundation in Chieng Mai, the principal city of northern Siam?

Formerly an independent kingdom, Chieng Mai had first been visited by Catholic missionaries in 1843. Despite their efforts they had been unsuccessful and had soon been forced to return to Bangkok. Twenty-four years later, 1867, American Presbyterians had come to Chieng Mai, beginning the work of evangelization with clinics and small catechetical centers. Their work, although fraught with difficulties, had been successful and they were now firmly established with both schools and hospitals. The territory was in some measure looked upon as theirs and very little effort had been made by Catholic missionaries. Some months earlier, with the

encouragement of Bishop Guébriant in Paris, Bishop Perros had sent two missionaries to explore the northern territories.

Their report, positive and enthusiastic, had persuaded him that the north was now a fertile field for evangelization. He was convinced, however--as was Father Mirabel--that it would be only through education that missionaries would succeed. Thus he was recommending that the Brothers of St. Gabriel--already successfully established in Bangkok--and the Ursulines establish schools in Chieng Mai. Although the Brothers showed some initial hesitation--unsure of the finances involved--Bernard leaped at the possibility. Despite the fact that *Mater Dei* was still understaffed and seriously in debt, she did not consider this a hindrance to a new foundation. Nothing was impossible in the kingdom of God! Certain that they were doing God's work, she never doubted that God would enable them to do it successfully. Her faith was such that miracles would come as no surprise.

Perros, encouraged by her enthusiasm, wrote at length to St. Jean Martin on February 5, outlining his hopes for this new field of evangelization:

Today I am coming to ask your help in the execution of a project so long and ardently desired and now on the way to be realized: a new Christian center in the north of Siam, at Chieng Mai, a big city where the American Protestants, coming in from Burma, have been established for a long time but where a Catholic mission will be welcomed as I have noted during the trip I have just made.... In order for us to succeed we must establish schools so that we will become known and respected. The Chères Frères of St. Gabriel will open a college for young boys; their reputation and success at Bangkok will attract a clientele from the beginning. For young girls, I would like the religious of St. Ursula to establish a foundation; they, too, will be assured of success....

They would begin modestly, Perros explained, with three sisters who had already been in Siam for some time and had some knowledge of the language: one French, one proficient in English (either an English or an American) and a lay sister. As for expenses: the mission would purchase the land until such time as the sisters were well established and could undertake the expenses involved.

As an additional incentive, he described the northern area in glowing terms: less noisy than Bangkok, cleaner, simpler, with a climate reminiscent of Europe--an ideal place for the sisters to go for vacation or recuperation. The roads were good and twice a week there was a direct train that made the trip from Bangkok in only twenty-six hours. In conclusion, he wrote, "I don't need to tell you that I am entirely at your service to help in every way I can."

The following day, February 6, Bernard wrote her own request to Rome. Perros had shared his letter with her, she explained, and she concurred with all he said. But In contrast to the bishop's measured request and explanation, Bernard's letter was a passionate expression of her missionary soul.

Please permit all your children of Siam, on their knees before you, Very Reverend Mother, to humbly request permission to answer, once again, the call of God. Northern Siam is new to Catholicism, and we must bring the Gospel there. It is purely from an apostolic motive that we beg you, Mother, to give us permission to obey the call of God and of the Church."

Put in such uncompromising terms, it was a request hard to refuse. But Bernard had learned that the General Curia was cautious about new ventures which involved money and personnel. Thus in an effort to win support she continued her letter with full details of how she felt this new foundation could be financed. As for personnel, she was more demanding, pointing out the specific needs of both houses.

Apparently her explanations, along with those of Perros, were sufficient to convince the General Curia and on March 21 letters went out from Rome to both the bishop and Bernard endorsing the new foundation. "I have not replied sooner to your request," St. Jean wrote to Perros, "because the Mother Assistants and I wished to take time for prayer and reflection. Today I am happy to tell you that we have accepted unanimously the project whose realization will, we hope, be for the greater glory of God."

The only voice opposing the foundation was that of Charles Brillaud, provincial of the north of France, who was clearly irritated by the fact that she had not been consulted or even informed of this latest venture despite the fact that the Siam mission was now affiliated with her province. As early as March 29, just a few days after the General Council had made its decision, Stanislas Perron (then Secretary General) wrote to Charles with "news that will astound you," explaining that the General Council had already sent out letters of permission for the Chieng Mai foundation.

On Good Shepherd Sunday, April 19, Bernard received her letter of approbation. For Bernard it was a perfect sign of God's pastoral care:

It is with real joy that I bring you--my dear children of Siam--the authorization you have requested. The Mother Assistants and I are profoundly happy to be able to respond to the call of your venerated Vicar Apostolic and to help him through our courageous missionaries to extend the reign of God in his vast vicariate.

With the precious document in hand, Bernard lost no time and the following Saturday, April 26, at 4:00p.m. she boarded the train for Chieng Mai. She was accompanied by Thérèse Mertens, while Gemma Feeney, recently appointed sub-prioress, was left in charge at *Mater Dei*. As good as its word, the train arrived at Chieng Mai at 6:00pm, exactly twenty-six hours after leaving Bangkok. They were met at the station by Father Mirabel and M.Plion, French Consul in the north, and brought to the tiny house of a group of indigenous sisters—Amantes de la Croix. They

themselves had only begun their mission a few months earlier, but they shared their poverty with gracious cordiality.

The following day Father Mirabel took them to see some of the available land. He first showed them the spot where he hoped the Brothers of St. Gabriel (Chères Frères, as they were called) would establish a school, and then they continued on to another sizeable piece of property which Bernard immediately saw as the site of the new foundation. The land was large enough to permit development, it had a beautiful view of the surrounding hills, and was conveniently close to a road. It already had a small wooden house which could be used for the nuns. Bernard's decision was instantaneous: "This is where we are going to install the house of the Blessed Virgin--*Regina Coeli*!" she later wrote in the Annals.

She was not unaware of the obstacles: the need for money, the fact that the people were poor and could afford only minimum tuition, and the formidable influence of the long-established Protestant missionaries. But Bernard was not easily daunted, and as the train pulled out of the station on the return trip to Bangkok, she promised: "We will be back!"

Almost at once, with the practical assistance of Gemma Feeney, she began working on plans for the new school. The Company of United Engineers would undertake to build two wings on the original house: one for classrooms, the other for a dormitory. Father Biotteau, Procurator General for the Missions Etrangères de Paris at Hong Kong, agreed to lend them the necessary money and Rome gave them permission to borrow the necessary 6,000 pounds sterling. By October 1931, the land had been purchased and the building begun.

That same month, two of the Chères Frères visited Chieng Mai and returned ten days later with an enthusiastic response. It was a decision Father Mirabel had been praying for, because he was convinced that parallel schools for boys and girls were essential for the work of the Church. The Brothers, however, had been hesitant, "exaggerating the risks and the difficulties," much to Mirabel's annoyance. In a report to Perros,

written in July of that year, he had noted: "The Ursulines have manifested a great zeal and a strong spirit of faith concerning this foundation and our conferences with them have been very quick and easy. How I regret not being able to say as much for the Brothers of St. Gabriel. The truth is that the only shadow in this undertaking has come from them."

Now, however, all obstacles had been cleared away and Mirabel wrote triumphantly, "When I say that the Brothers' college and the Ursuline institute are assured of success, I do not exaggerate." His plan was for the new schools to open simultaneously in May of 1932. The time line was tight, allowing only six months for all that had to be done: construction of the buildings, gathering the necessary furnishings, constructing school furniture, drawing up appropriate curricula, collecting essential books, etc. and, not least, finding sufficient funds to provide for their basic needs for the first weeks.

Bernard had already drawn up and sent to Rome a list suggesting the sisters she thought would be best for the new foundation. On November 1 she received the official letter specifying those who would go to Chieng Mai. The founders of *Regina Coeli* would be Bernard Mancel, Marie de Lourdes Simons, Bernadette Farget, Jeanne Terrace and a promised missionary from America. On November 24 Marie de Lourdes wrote to her friend Father Gill in New York, "I must tell you that 1932 has something in store for me. I have been chosen...to go to Chieng Mai, 400 miles north...I am delighted. But I'll need some extra prayers for it is always a little hard to pull up the foundation."

Despite the fact that plans for the new foundation were moving forward quickly, Charles Brillaud continued to question the wisdom of the plan. A competent administrator, she was distrustful of what she considered Bernard's impulsive and sometimes erratic judgments. "Mother Bernard disconcerts me a little," she wrote to St. Jean; "I sometimes ask myself if she is an ideal person for [superior]." Her judgments, she found, were made so quickly and then reversed just as quickly. One moment everything was fine; then suddenly she was displeased. It was her continued demand for

more missionaries, however, that led Charles to write at length—and with some vexation—to St. Jean Martin in late December:

I cannot seem to make this poor mother understand that we do not have the religious which she is constantly soliciting. I am now convinced that she has no idea of our situation. This foundation which you have decided on....could it not be stopped now or at least postponed for three or four years or offered to another congregation? This thought has come to me so clearly that I felt I had a duty to submit it to you very respectfully and in all submission. I will abandon myself with all my heart to whatever you decide.

Mother Marie Bernard insists, **insists** on having more people, but subjects cannot be created. Money can come unexpectedly but not a religious who is formed, educated, ready for her work--which necessarily takes years....If it were Bangkok alone, we could sustain it by sending some recruits in order to insure a more normal life for the religious and to develop the vocations that Mother Bernard talks about. Then it might be time for a foundation; but today it is premature, it seems to me.

In her reply, St. Jean tended to agree with Charles' assessment, assuring her that "your fear concerning M.M. Bernard is not without foundation." She, too, had noted her erratic judgments but, she pointed out, at the moment she had no one to replace her. Despite Charles' continued remonstrance, plans for the new foundation continued.

Charles' anxiety was far from groundless. Once the chosen four departed for Chiang Mai, only twelve sisters would be left to carry on the work of two schools. Even with the addition of three promised Americans, the burdens would be heavy, especially since two of the community were becoming an increasing source of worry. From her arrival, Francis Johnson had been ill-at-ease, unable to take hold of the tasks she was given. While

still a novice, she had expressed a strong conviction that her vocation was for the foreign missions. Her superiors, perhaps foolishly, had acceded to her request and sent her to Siam within weeks of her first profession. From the beginning, however, she had been restless and discontented. Now Bernard was faced with the difficult decision of whether she should be permitted to make her perpetual vows. Francis was not without virtue and Bernard acknowledged that she was "talented, generous, obedient and dearly loved." Yet there seemed to be no work on the mission which satisfied her. She hated teaching but when asked what else might make her happy--caring for the sick, the crèche, contemplative life--she didn't seem to know. She did not want to return to Europe and said that if she were sent she would leave the Order. Yet the suggestion that she might be transferred to the China mission did not seem to bring her any peace. In the light of these responses, Bernard was increasingly dubious about Francis' mission vocation.

The other problem was Maria Luisa Geminati. She, too, seemed increasingly unhappy and withdrawn. Unable to eat or sleep, she was a source of constant concern. Like Francis, she was unable to express what would ease her pain but more and more her emotional outbursts indicated that the pressures of the Siam mission were more than she could handle. Even working at Calvary with the quiet and devoted Agnès had not helped her and in November Agnès wrote to Rome, "I deeply regret that I have not been able to provide peace and calm for my companion."

Since, despite her obvious unhappiness, Maria Luisa still averred that her vocation was for the missions, arrangements were finally made for her to leave Bangkok for China by mid-November. It was not a satisfactory decision from Bernard's point of view, since the China mission was, if anything, more unsettled than that of Siam, but under the circumstances she was unable to suggest anything better.

No wonder that the thought of three young Americans--strong, mature, well-educated--elicited a new joy in the community. Stimulated by the circular of St. Jean Martin asking for volunteers for the missions, in

January 1931, Sisters Beatrice Hanson of Galveston, Texas, Clotilde Angela McCan also of Galveston and Mary Sheehan of Decatur, Illinois wrote to Mother Barbara Klaholt, recently appointed provincial of the Central Province of the United States, offering themselves for foreign service.

Sister Beatrice Hanson, born Edwina in Galveston in 1900, had made her novitiate in Dallas, Texas, and her perpetual vows in Galveston in 1926 where she continued to teach. Her letter was clear and direct: "I wish to offer myself for the Montana missions or one of those abroad....I have not been blessed with any remarkable talents but I can and am willing to work hard."

Sister Clotilde Angela McCan, born Jane in County Wexford, Ireland in 1903, had also made her novitiate in Dallas and her perpetual vows in Galveston in 1927. Her response to the call for missionaries was, like her personality, light and exuberant: "Would you please add my name to your list of 'would be' missionaries. I am twenty-seven and have been blessed with the best of health, good teeth, good eyesight and the ability to eat anything....I am so happy and light-footed now--ready to jump anywhere at God's word....I shall be willing to tramp anywhere--like a hobo--if only I can do a little something for God there."

Sister Mary Sheehan, born Margaret in Decatur, Illinois in 1901, had made her novitiate at Alton, Illinois and her perpetual vows in her hometown of Decatur in 1925. Of the three, she seemed the most quiet and level-headed with a few more years teaching experience to her credit. In her report, her superior had written of her: "She is earnest and reliable, sensitive, conscientious in the discharge of her duty and manifests a firm faith."

By June of that year all three of them had been informed that they had been accepted for missionary service and that their destination would be Siam. The summer was spent in preparation for their new life, and in October, joined by Sister Rita Buttell from Nebraska who was destined for Harbin, a new mission in northern China, they said their tearful goodbyes and

boarded the train for Seattle, Washington. They arrived on October 15 and two days later began their month-long trip aboard the *SS President Taft*. Beatrice Hanson was to be their scribe and the day before they left she wrote the first of her dozens of amusing and graphic letters:

Tomorrow morning bright and early we shall begin to collect our seven boxes of candy, four cartons of cookies, three bags of fruit, three umbrellas, two hand bags, this little portable [typewriter], three kodaks, one thermos bottle, three cloaks, one shawl, and a bag full of other things--luckily our trunks have gone on ahead--thus cargoed we shall cross the gangplank of the *SS President Taft* on which, if she does not sink under our weight, we shall steam away over the unmarked boulevards of the broad Pacific.

Their voyage was calm and relatively uneventful and it was not until they reached Hong Kong that they experienced one of those inexplicable confusions that often marked travel in the Orient. When they arrived at the wharf to board their ship for the last leg of their journey, they were told they were too late: the last tender to take them to the *Anshun* had already left! Desperate at the sight of all their luggage steaming away without them, they invoked the help of an agent of the American Express. Within minutes he signaled to a motorboat and they were summarily pushed aboard, and amid flying spray reached the *Anshun* while the boarding ladder was still down. The following morning they reached Swatow where after a day meeting the sisters and seeing something of the Chinese mission, they journeyed on, leaving Rita Buttell who was to continue up to the northern provinces.

For the next four days they continued along the China Sea and into the gulf of Siam, experiencing a frightening turbulence caused by the aftermath of a typhoon. Finally on Thursday, November 13, they turned into the muddy Menam River that would bring them to Bangkok. "We spent an interesting morning ascending the Menam," Beatrice wrote.

Past dense groves of coconut palms, emerald rice fields, Buddhist Wats or temples, among which the spires of two little Catholic churches bravely bore their crosses aloft. About 10am we reached the docks, and there "our hearts leaped up" when, amidst the strange costumes (or lack of costumes), we beheld the black and white of our own Ursulines. After the first greetings, Reverend Mother took us to the Cathedral, as we were fasting in the hope of receiving Holy Communion. First we visited the Bishop who kindly sent a priest to give us our first Communion in our Promised Land. Then on to *Mater Dei*--a beautiful little convent in the midst of broad green lawns and flowering trees. Our dear Mothers and Sisters are waiting to welcome us. "Home," again, at last!

The new missionaries were eased into their new life with three free days to unpack, get adjusted and write home to family and friends. On the day after their arrival, Mary Sheehan wrote back to her community in Decatur:

Mater Dei is a beautiful house.... We have a comfortable dormitory and community room. In fact the whole house is very pleasant. The gardens are a rich green now because the rainy season is just finished. They have a sort of canal system in the grounds which gives the appearance of having small lakes.

The following Monday they stepped nervously into the classroom for the first time. They found the teaching far less onerous than they had expected, for they were given only small groups of children who had already some mastery of English. As Mary Sheehan observed, their pupils were quiet, obedient, and deferential. Discipline was clearly not a problem at *Mater Dei*. They were advised, however, by Mother Raphael, headmistress of the school, that their schedules were purposely light in order to give them maximum time for the study of Siamese. It was essential that they pass their Siamese examination as soon as possible in order that their credentials

be accepted by the Minister of Education. Although this had always been a primary consideration for the sisters, it was now becoming increasingly important, since there was a growing national movement in Siam to become less subservient to European customs and culture. While still anxious to learn English, the Siamese were now attempting to develop more pride in their own language. In a perceptive letter to St. Jean Martin, Gemma Feeney wrote:

The Siamese are very keen to have their language keep pace with the times....It's very understandable. The Siamese have learnt much of civilization from Europeans but now they become anxious not to lose their status as a nation and language is such an important factor in the building of a national spirit. I am quite sure that if our school is to develop, we must manage to have the standard of Siamese up to that of English and French. I think it is rather a drawback that we try to have two parallel schools--French and English; however, His Excellency the Bishop and Reverend Mother consider it necessary to have both.

Although it was not clear at the time, Siam was entering into a new era that would place a growing burden on schools, particularly those run by foreigners. But none of this curbed the nuns' enthusiasm as they prepared to open their second mission. A visit from Bishop de Guébriant, the head of the Missions Etrangères de Paris, further encouraged them as he congratulated the Ursulines for undertaking an enterprise of such value for the Church. Such praise, however, did not diminish their financial burdens and for a few weeks in January it seemed that they would not be able to make the necessary payments. "Beginnings are like this," Marie de Lourdes wrote philosophically to a friend in New York. "So we live by faith and not by worry...If Our Lord wants *Regina Coeli*, I'm sure he'll pull us through."

Equally upsetting were the continued worries about personnel. With the departure of Maria Luisa, Francis Johnson had been sent to work at Calvary

with Agnès. But this did nothing to assuage her depression and anxiety and in January Bernard received word from Rome that Francis could not be accepted for perpetual vows while she remained so unsettled. In February, in company with some returning missionaries, she traveled to Paris and then back to England. Whether she ever found the Utopian life she yearned for, we cannot know for with her departure from Siam all records about her cease.

A further disappointment was Kunigunde Bagczar who had arrived from China in late November. She was primarily a music teacher and was not equipped for the classroom teaching Bernard had expected. "She only knows music," Bernard wrote in despair; "she speaks French wretchedly and knows no English." It was, therefore, an especially crushing blow when, toward the end of February, she received word from Charles Brillaud that no one could be sent from the north of France. "This is a terrible blow—the word is not too strong in our situation," Bernard wrote to St. Jean Martin. "She asked me if we couldn't postpone the foundation until after the General Chapter. This is impossible!....The Catholic Mission is opening at the same date. The bishop is coming to give a solemn benediction for the opening of this new apostolic field...we cannot pull back."

Despite all the difficulties, Bernard had the gift of pulling the community along with her, keeping their eyes on the future, rejoicing in the fact that they had scraped by with their payments for construction, grateful that Marie de Lourdes and Agnès had passed their Siamese examination, grateful that Father Mirabel was working hard for their interests at Chieng Mai. But while Bernard kept her visionary eyes on the future, it was Gemma Feeney—now left with the administration of *Mater Dei*—who assessed their present situation: 198 children and only seven Ursuline teachers!

Despite the work that lay ahead, in some ways it was easier for those who were going. The sense of new beginnings, of being chosen for such an important enterprise buoyed their spirits and on March 13 Clotilde Angela—exuberant by temperament—wrote:

It is just three weeks and three days till we board the Royal Siamese State Express for Xiangmai. I can hardly wait. A railway carload of furniture, etc. has already gone. Mother Marie de Lourdes has the syllabus, program for the year, lists of rules for children and teachers all made out already. Even the hours are down in black and white. We shall have to walk the chalk line at Regina Coeli!

On March 21, the beginning of spring vacation, the nuns began their annual retreat, finishing just in time to celebrate Easter. Ten days later, on April 6, the departure for Chieng Mai took place. It was a solemn occasion and Mother Bernard insisted on the full ritual. Garbed in their long communion veils and cloaks (despite the heat) the community gathered in the chapel where Mother Bernard read the official act which named Mother Raphael Vurnik prioress of *Mater Dei*. Then followed the act of obedience by each of the religious remaining at *Mater Dei* and the chanting of the *Te Deum*. Then the other appointments were announced: Agnès Delattre sub-prioress; Gemma Feeney, councillor and mistress general of the school; Thérèse Mertens, procurator.

Following this ritual, Bernard and Raphael left to visit Bishop Perros and present the new superior to him. Upon their return, the two communities gathered again in the chapel; this time it was Raphael who read the official act appointing Bernard Mancel prioress of *Regina Coeli*. Following dinner, there was only time for some last words and then, at three o'clock, after the Prayers for Travelers were said, the five foundresses, accompanied by Agnès, Thérèse and Marguerite Marie, left for the railroad station.

There they were surrounded by a crowd of pupils, parents, friends--especially the family of "Little Lucie" Dardarananda, now Sister Marie Joseph, a novice at Beaugency. Overwhelmed by flowers, fruits and little gifts, they received Bishop Perros' blessing and then, with a final embrace for the Ursulines who had accompanied them, they boarded the train for the north. It was just four o'clock, April 6, 1932.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"OUR QUIET REVOLUTION"

The Royal Siamese State Express which was carrying the five missionaries north was not bringing them to a primitive land. While Chieng Mai was far different from the sprawling crowded urban center of Bangkok, it had its own charm and culture, having been until very recently the capital of its own small kingdom. Nor was it, strictly speaking, without the "light of the Gospel." Chieng Mai and its surrounding territory had been the scene of evangelizing efforts since 1867 when the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions had first authorized a mission in the far north of Siam. On January 3 four missionaries--Dr. Michael McGilvary and Dr. Wilson, along with their courageous wives--began the long and perilous river journey north from Bangkok. Forty sets of rapids had to be negotiated with everything carried along the muddy banks until they could rejoin the river. The trip was arduous and seemingly endless. The missionaries did not arrive at Chieng Mai until May 3--just three months after they had started out.

In those first years they were completely cut off, for the railroad from Bangkok was not finished until 1923--fifty-five years after the establishment of the mission. Their only help in times of sickness was the miniscule medical supply they had been able to bring with them: vaccine against small pox, quinine for malaria and their all-purpose medical

dictionary--"Family Medicine for India." In such an atmosphere the women bore children and nursed each other through deadly epidemics.

Although their initial efforts were through dispensaries--tending minor injuries and teaching the people the rudiments of health--they soon realized that education would be a far more successful tool for evangelization. At first the Protestant wives taught women simple skills--sewing, better ways of washing and caring for their homes. Since very few men and almost no women were able to read or write, one of the first endeavors took place in the McGilvary home where a small group of girls gathered to be taught the elements of literacy. By 1879 this had grown into a school for girls: Prarachaya School which by 1928 had become Dara Academy with its own beautiful campus. The boys' school began eight years later, in 1887, and in 1906 Rama VI--then Crown Prince--laid the cornerstone of a new building which thus came to be called Prince Royal's College.

Despite their modest beginnings, the missionaries were determined that their schools would be substantial and they did their best to establish a standard of excellence. As a result, they were favored by the government, especially since the graduates were often very helpful in raising the level of government schools.

In March 1928 the Presbyterian Mission had a three-day celebration to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of its founding. By this time their achievements were impressive: McGilvary Theological Seminary, Prince Royal's College for boys, Dara Academy for girls, McCormick Hospital, Nurses Training School, Chieng Mai Leper Asylum. McCormick Hospital alone had five modern buildings: the main building, a maternity ward, a steam laundry, an electric plant, X-ray apparatus house.

In the light of such accomplishments, it is easy to see why the American Presbyterians considered Chieng Mai in some way their own territory. Ecumenism, unfortunately, was still an untapped resource and there was no thought--by either Protestants or Catholics--of working together for the spread of the Gospel. While there seemed to have been no open hostility in

Chieng Mai, it was, as a contemporary Presbyterian missionary recently described it: a question of parallel lines which never met. Although there was no effort to work together for a common cause, in fact, the nuns found themselves completely dependent on McCormick Hospital for their health care and gratefully acknowledged the concern and generosity of the doctors.

But all such thoughts were far from the nuns who arrived in high spirits at the Chieng Mai railroad station on April 7, at 6:00p.m.--exactly on time. Father Mirabel was waiting for them along with M. Plion, the French Consul, and a young man sent by the Brothers to assist them. The four nuns and their abundant luggage was piled into the waiting autos and brought to their new home. Almost at once they were driven to Father Mirabel's mission house for a visit to the tiny room where the Blessed Sacrament was reserved. "It is a poor little chapel," Marie de Lourdes wrote, "where little bottles have to do for cruets but the atmosphere of prayer that permeates it is extraordinary. It is a little heaven on earth." Appropriately, the nuns sang the *Regina Coeli* in gratitude for bringing them thus far.

When they returned to the convent they discovered that everything had been prepared for them: the beds had been put up, chairs and lamps were in place, and flowers graced their table. Even supper was waiting for them, prepared by the Amantes de la Croix, the recently formed native congregation. "Father Mirabel had seen to everything," Marie de Lourdes wrote later. "There was not a detail lacking that could have added to our pleasure or comfort."

After twenty-six hot and uncomfortable hours on the train, they were glad to be in their beds with their mosquito nets secured about them. Father Mirabel had told them to sleep as long as they could, but at 6:30 they were up and dressed, eager to participate in their first Mass in their new mission. Although the first night had been one of dreamless sleep, their next night was less peaceful. They were no sooner asleep than a rain of pebbles fell from the roof, followed by a larger stone that crashed near the bed of Mother Bernard. Startled, they jumped from their beds unsure of where the

noise had come from. But Bernard had no doubt: it was the devil! At once she blessed every corner with holy water and together they said the "Hail Mary"

The next day she asked Father Mirabel to bless the house, "but," Bernard wrote, "just as he was about to begin, it got so dark that you could see nothing and we had to guide Father around with a lantern. The rain fell in torrents....Since this [blessing] our house has never experienced any further diabolic troubles. There can be no doubt that this was a true Satanic fury." But, Bernard asserted, this event, far from discouraging them, cheered them because it clearly indicated how enraged the devil was at their presence. If there were those who felt that the "infernal racket," as Bernard flamboyantly described it, might have been a natural phenomenon in an old house which had been long uninhabited, they did not express it in front of Bernard.

They had only two days to make final preparations before school registration which was set for April 11. The new wings for the school were far from finished and most of the sisters' time was spent adjusting the little space they had. Even so, on April 11--just as they had promised the bishop--*Regina Coeli* was opened for registration. That first day they registered 61 pupils. Their original plan, to start with elementary grades and then move gradually toward a secondary school, was abandoned when increasing numbers of parents begged them to open a higher level. They clearly lacked the necessary personnel--only four Ursuline teachers and five Siamese assistants--two of them from *Mater Dei*. But Bernard, who heard the voice of God in every demand, acceded to the request. No wonder Father Mirabel could write in his report that year: "The zeal of the Ursulines has not flagged for a moment and deserves our gratitude as well as God's special blessing."

By the time school opened on April 16, the nuns had begun to settle in. Mother Bernard had already paid a formal visit to the French Consul, the Governor, and the Mayor, all of whom had been gracious and welcoming. They had also gone up to the mountains with Father Mirabel who was

anxious to find land which would serve as a vacation spot. They had decorated the best room in the house for their chapel and there the first mass was said on April 23. And, most important of all, on May 7, after weeks of anxious waiting, the official permission to open their school was received.

The first letters the nuns wrote from Chieng Mai were positive and enthusiastic. "It's a perfect life," wrote Bernadette Farget who seemed to thrive on challenges. In Clotilde Angela's first letters, she wrote exuberantly of their new mission, of "elephants in the backyard, dusting and fanning themselves"; and of their "dear little convent--all blue and white--Our Lady's colors. We have almost every shade of blue in the heavens for the Siamese painters never seem to be able to mix the same tint twice!" Marie de Lourdes in her first letter to her parents said little about their physical situation but reaffirmed the joy of her missionary vocation: "From the above address you may know that we have reached the Promised Land, hidden among the hills of Northern Siam. If it is not flowing with milk and honey, our hearts at least are flowing and overflowing with joy and happiness; our vocation seems more beautiful than ever."

Shortly after the opening of school, Marie de Lourdes wrote to her parents again, this time describing something of their school day which lasted from 8:00a.m. to 4:00p.m.--about the same as they had been used to at *Mater Dei* but with only four boarders to tend to--although there was room for many more.

I just love Chieng Mai! The work is as interesting as can be--and there is loads of it! I have a mighty hard time getting through what I have to do. I am still about a month behind time....I have to play [the piano] and teach singing!! If there are any of our old marches in the house would you please send them to me. I have nothing in march time but a few hymns...If you have any books with old classical songs--"Dixie"--"Battle Hymn of the Republic"--will you send them to me if you don't need them.

Apparently no one saw anything ludicrous in teaching Siamese Buddhists to sing and march to American Civil War songs!

Within two weeks of the opening of school (91 pupils dressed in the blue and white uniform of *Mater Dei*) the "perfect life" began to experience serious difficulties. The United Engineers who were responsible for the construction of their new wings began to demand more money than they had agreed on, pointing out that the work had been more difficult and taken longer than they had anticipated. In addition, one of the workmen had been badly injured by a falling beam and the nuns were being held responsible for his medical expenses.

Soon after, their devoted teacher, Mrs. Nielson, was diagnosed to be suffering from tuberculosis and could no longer work with them. At the same time they discovered that the young woman whom they had hired to do the cooking was subject to strange nervous fits and had to be sent home. Since they had as yet no gates or fences there were thieves everywhere as well as invasions of dogs, cows, and oxen which roamed unhindered through the grounds. In addition, April and May were the hottest periods of the year and even the redoubtable Bernard admitted that teaching under such conditions was exhausting.

In the first week of June Bishop Perros arrived for the solemn opening of the new Catholic Mission. He blessed the parish school and *Regina Coeli* and said Mass for the nuns in their small chapel. While he was delighted with the school registration and with the good impression the nuns had made on the people, he was also aware of the difficulties they faced. *Regina Coeli* had been started at great sacrifice to *Mater Dei* whose personnel had been drastically reduced. Perros was deeply concerned lest the success of one be dependent on the failure of the other.

Although the foundresses of *Regina Coeli* had left *Mater Dei* less than three months earlier, the latter had already suffered painfully from their absence. The burden of reduced numbers had fallen heavily on Raphael Vurnik, the new superior, who was already beginning to feel the symptoms

of the illness that would almost destroy her. On May 26 she began a long letter to St. Jean Martin—a letter she did not finish until mid-July. It was a litany of trials. Little Teresita Lightwood, who had come to them four years earlier, had been suffering from extreme fatigue and trouble breathing. The doctor feared that her lungs were affected and recommended that she be sent back to Europe where she would receive the food, climate and rest necessary to restore her.

Almost simultaneously, Raphael learned that Kunigunde Bagczar, who had arrived in Bangkok from China only the year before, had now made the decision to return to Europe. "The news of her departure was like a thunderbolt," wrote the stricken Raphael. On June 15 she was able to book passage for both of them, thus leaving the mission with only eight sisters. Two of these worked full time in the Chinese school at Calvary, thus reducing the entire teaching staff of *Mater Dei* to six nuns for a school of over two hundred pupils.

Raphael's concern was not only for the health—physical and spiritual—of the nuns, but also for the well-being of the school. The present system of teaching two full courses—one in French and one in English—could not continue, especially since the demand for French was very small compared to that for English. "There is always great difficulty for the French school," she wrote, "as here the language used in commerce is English." Thus they have no more than twenty or thirty pupils registered in the French division. Since this year they have no staff competent to teach French, she has made the decision to no longer offer a complete course of study. This, however, will increase their desperate need for at least one more sister capable of teaching English.

Their life was further burdened by the government's rigorous regulations that all teachers be competent in Siamese. Marguerite Marie Penn, Mary Sheehan and Beatrice Hanson were still studying for their examination. Mother Gemma Feeney should also be studying but the burden of her duties made this impossible. Although they tried to speak Siamese at recreation, this became extremely exhausting. All of this impinged on their

spiritual life. At the moment it was impossible to have Office in common and the state of extreme fatigue of most of the sisters had led her to retrench part of the morning meditation.

Even as she wrote this long letter, her own health was visibly deteriorating. What had originally been diagnosed as "nervous exhaustion" was manifesting itself as something far more serious. By mid-June word had reached Chieng Mai that Raphael was seriously ill, and Bernard wrote to Xavier Marteau that had they known about this ahead of time, they would never have been able to leave. Although Raphael recovered, the attack had weakened her considerably and for months she was forced to reduce her activity.

Perros, witnessing the serious diminishments at *Mater Dei*, was profoundly concerned about the fate of the mission and, as his pastoral responsibility, he undertook the difficult task of evaluating the entire Ursuline mission and assessing its future. On June 15 he wrote at length to St. Jean describing the situation of the mission and suggesting some changes which he felt would be beneficial. He began with high praise for what had already been accomplished in Chieng Mai. The people were delighted with the school and the nuns were happy in their work. The registration was very good for a beginning and there seemed no doubt that their income would suffice for daily needs. There was no possibility, however, that with their present income they would be able to reduce the debts they had incurred. This was a grave worry for the future of the institution.

In some ways, he pointed out, it was *Mater Dei* which had made the greater sacrifice. Five able religious had been taken for the Chieng Mai mission. Then, no sooner had they left than Mother Raphael was stricken with a severe illness. Although she was now on the way to recovery, she would not be able to resume the full responsibilities of her charge. At the same time, Sister Kunigunde had decided to return to Europe after a short term of service. Now Teresita Lightwood had been diagnosed with incipient tuberculosis and must have complete rest. Those who were left were

stretched to the breaking point. To increase their worries, the number of pupils has decreased, thus reducing their income.

In order to carry on the work of the school, Perros suggested a modification in the program of studies: instead of two separate courses--French and English--he recommended that they be taught in the same course, thus reducing the teaching load. It was the same basic plan that Raphael had also endorsed. "This will enable us to continue with the present personnel," Perros explained, "even though from the point of view of French, it will lessen the importance of the school. It's a terrible sacrifice but one which is necessary in our present circumstances."

His second suggestion to St. Jean Martin, which also grew out of his concern for personnel, was more significant in terms of general government.

We are urgently in need of reinforcements. Please, Reverend Mother, come to our help! I know only too well the present difficulties of recruitment in Europe, in France in particular; I know you have done your best to obtain subjects from the province [France North] to which the mission of Siam is attached. But a province is necessarily limited and it is not always possible to find there the special abilities needed for the Mission.

Please permit me, Reverend Mother, to submit to you in all simplicity and trust a suggestion inspired solely by the desire to save souls. I believe that there would be an advantage in modifying your present organization. Instead of attaching *this* mission to *this* province in a more or less arbitrary way, might it not be better to create, at the center of the Roman Union, a special mission department with its own office, its own financial administration, and in time even its own novitiate? The directress of this department would be concerned only with the Missions. She would have a better

understanding of their needs, their possibilities and could more easily help them and follow their development....

This would certainly be a substantial modification in the Order of St. Ursula, but it seems to me to be necessitated by the increasing development of your religious in the missions. It would certainly be approved by the Holy See which has at heart the apostolate in pagan countries. I believe that this is a thought to examine and develop; please forgive me, Reverend Mother, for suggesting it to you such as it is.

Perros' letter provided an accurate and perceptive appraisal of the Ursuline situation in Siam. But it did far more: it attempted to find a solution to a personnel problem which he recognized to be more extensive than Siam. Since the Roman Union had the benefit of being international, could it not utilize this advantage more satisfactorily? A Mission Department situated in Rome would release an individual province from the obligation of providing subjects for a particular mission and concomitantly increase the ability of the mission to receive subjects from a larger bank. Given the situation as Perros saw it, it was, indeed, a suggestion to be taken seriously.

Mother St. Jean Martin's answer was dated just three weeks later. Although her reply was, as always, gracious and deferential, there was also a somewhat defensive tone. Perhaps she felt that Perros considered her unfeeling, unaware of the suffering and needs of her daughters, for she began by avowing, "If I were to tell you, Your Excellency, that the care of this house is one of my most persistent cares, the most gnawing, and sometimes the most agonizing, I would not exaggerate." But she continued, she understood, too, the situation of superiors who could not sacrifice the works of their own province for the works of the foreign missions. As for his suggestion for the reorganization of mission government, she stood firm.

I thank you sincerely, Your Excellency, for the suggestions you have been good enough to propose for the organization

of the Missions....After some months of study I have seen some grave inconveniences and for this reason I have stood by that which we have adopted and which has succeeded perfectly in many religious institutes. However, I have no decisive thought about this and I will not cling stubbornly to this plan if it does not seem to be the best, for I want to do whatever will be for the most useful service of God, of the Church, and of souls. And I promise you, Your Excellency, to continue to pray and reflect...that the Divine Will be made known. Once this Holy Will is known, our happiness will lie in accomplishing it.

By the time St. Jean's letter reached Perros, however, changes far more profound than those involving the Ursuline mission had taken place in Siam. Against all expectation, Siam had experienced a revolution. To both Siamese and foreigners the revolution came as a shock. It had seemed to most that the Siamese character did not have the mettle of revolutionaries. An English schoolmaster who had spent more than ten years in Bangkok wrote:

Although I had been in the country for the best part of ten years and had friends amongst all classes, the revolution had taken me completely by surprise. I knew the ingredients were there all right, but subservience was so ingrained in the Siamese that I could not imagine them defying authority....It was not the case of revolution coming from an empty belly. Hunger and hardship such as that were unknown in Siam....

Yet the more I thought about it, the more obvious it was that it had to come some time or other. You could not go on educating young Siamese and sending them to live in democratic countries and then expect them to return with closed eyes to an archaic absolute monarchy. The truth of

the matter was that the revolution sprang from political hunger.*

The Bolshevik Revolution begun in Russia fifteen years earlier had by the 1930s spread far beyond Russia. In Vietnam (which bordered Siam), the influence of Communism continued to grow and would eventually cause the French to lose power in what was then called Indo-China. Most important for Siam, however, were the developments in China. By the 1930s China--always politically unstable--had become more volatile than ever. Young Russian Marxists roamed the cities, encouraging Mao Tse-Tung and his communist followers in their struggle against the Nationalists under the leadership of Chiang Kai-Shek. The southern Chinese had for years formed a considerable minority in Siam. Now, with increasing unrest and escalating poverty at home, the wave of emigrants grew. Siam, generally welcoming in the past, began to limit emigration, fearful that Chinese communism might be reaching into their monarchical kingdom.

Whatever the ultimate or proximate causes, at 5:00a.m. on the morning of June 24, 1932 a group of middle-level military officers and civilian officials seized control of Bangkok. Some of the princes had been placed under house arrest and others had been imprisoned in the Throne Hall on the palace grounds. A People's Party was proclaimed, although in fact very few of the people were involved or even aware of what was happening. Most Siamese were ignorant of politics; illiteracy was high and communication inadequate. As was later said, "the revolution did not develop a government by the people but by a party." The leaders themselves were in no way radical. Their intention was far from that of establishing a real democracy in which the people as a whole would participate in the government. Their aim was not to eliminate the throne but to establish a conservative constitutional monarchy.

* F.K. Exell. *A Siamese Tapestry*, London, 1962.

King Prajadhipok was, at the moment of the coup, not in Bangkok but in his summer palace at Hua Hin. Here the official word was brought to him:

The People's Party...have now taken over the administration of the country and have taken members of the Royal Family...hostages...We therefore enjoin Your Majesty to return to the Capital to reign again as king under the constitutional monarchy as established by the People's Party.

The King conceded at once and two days later, on June 26, he was in Bangkok where he was immediately presented with a copy of the new constitution. By the following day he had consented to it. In fact, what had been drawn up by the "revolutionaries" was not far from some of the plans the King himself was currently concerned with. When, the year before, he had returned to Siam from a trip to North America, he had already formulated new ideas for reorganizing his country's government. He would appoint a prime minister, he would organize a cabinet which would be responsible to a legislative assembly composed of an equal number of elected and appointed members. It was a plan very close to what would be adopted following the coup. But whatever the King's intended plans, the June coup had anticipated them and there was no way he could be spared the consequent humiliation for himself and the royal family.

Siam had, against all odds, accomplished a bloodless revolution. In fact, some of the leaders objected to using the word "revolution" at all since they prided themselves on the peaceful way in which major change had been initiated. The crowds that had gathered around the Throne Hall in the early morning were curious rather than hostile and there was no evidence of violence. Although most shops had been closed in the morning, by afternoon it seemed quite safe for them to open.

Although Prajadhipok was far from a tyrannical ruler, yet the monarchical structure of the country provided few political rights for the commoners who felt that they had no legal means of redress against the undisputed power of the royalty. Although Bangkok published an amazing number of

newspapers without formal censorship, yet there was always an atmosphere of secrecy and the unspoken awareness that the government could suppress a paper which displeased it. In addition, the King had inherited large debts which he did his best to reduce; however, like all other countries Thailand was suffering the effects of a world-wide depression. The taxes he tried to impose were met with opposition in the cities and in the rural areas massive crop failures increased the sense that the poor were being exploited in order to maintain the luxury of the royal families. In May 1932 an article appeared in a Siamese paper which concluded: "Though Siam has gone through some critical stages during the last hundred and fifty years, it is doubtful if she has ever been in such a plight as she is at the present day." A month later the revolution took place.

At *Regina Coeli*, and even at *Mater Dei*, the revolution seemed to be of only moderate concern. On June 24 the convent annalist at *Regina Coeli* wrote, "We learned that there was serious trouble brewing in the capital," and two days later, she noted that the absolute monarchy had been abolished in place of a constitutional monarchy, observing, "This change took place rather quietly." Bernard had written at once to Rome to allay their fears, "Don't be alarmed about the news of our revolution, it couldn't have been more peaceful."

Mary Sheehan, observing events from *Mater Dei*, wrote to her family in July, providing a few more details:

No doubt the U.S. press had thrilling headlines about a Siamese revolution on June 24th. Well, this is how it affected us. School begins at 8:30. About nine o'clock different cars began to come for the children and they continued coming throughout the day, especially those belonging to the Royal family and you know how numerous that is when each prince has a number of wives. One of our girls was summoned from an Algebra class I was teaching by an excited servant because her father, one of the chief chancellors, was arrested. Personally I think the whole

affair was closely planned. The Peoples Party fortified the palace and then conducted their state prisoners there. The latter were held there until the King signed the agreement for a new constitution. Only one officer lost his life. During the exciting days we were very calm here at Mater Dei. The Bishop came to see Reverend Mother and tell us everything was well ordered. So, never worry when you hear of trouble; the foreigners are always very well protected.

More shocking to some of the nuns than the actual revolution was some of its consequences. The spirit of "freedom" was in the air and at the college ran by the Brothers of St. Gabriel (the Chères Frères) the students staged a revolution of their own, demanding the right to celebrate Buddhist festivals, to reduce the tuition, to accept back a boy who had been expelled. After several days the college reopened, granting amnesty to all students involved with the exception of the ringleaders. "You can see what young people do!" wrote Bernard in consternation.

A few months later Marie de Lourdes in a letter to her "dear brother," Father Gill, attempted to appraise the consequences of the revolution:

Siam is in a painful state at present; she does not know how to use the liberty she has gained. It is a petty revolution here, a petty revolution there and no one will be surprised if war breaks out....The latest is that they are putting up posters, "Down with Prajadhipok....Russia alone can teach a nation how to use freedom." It is rumored that the king will abdicate soon; he has no longer any power and is at the end of his physical strength.

We have a new governor here [Chieng Mai]....a new anthem, and as one might expect, women are working their way into politics! What the outcome of this will be the Lord alone knows! We fear an increase of liberty these days when Communists are so numerous. We pity the King and

the princes and pray that all this suffering will bring them to God. The King asked to be left on the throne in order to facilitate intercourse with other countries, saying that his life will not be a long one. Very likely he will have no successor; the Constitutional Monarchy will probably become a Republic.

It was an appraisal made with little knowledge of the whole scene and without an understanding of how inherent the concept of kingship was to the Siamese people. Moreover, in none of the sisters' comments was any mention made of how the revolution might affect them; and yet it was inevitable that such political upheaval--peaceful and ordered though it was--would stir up a new sense of what it meant to be Siamese. This growing sense of nationalism was to have its repercussions on the system of education and particularly on educational establishments run by foreigners.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“NO, WE ARE NOT AFRAID”

The subtle consequences of the June revolution seemed of far less importance to the nuns than their own internal affairs, especially in Chieng Mai, far from the scene of the action. The additions to the "blue house" which were supposed to have been completed by the time school opened in April were still under construction. To Bernard, with her will to accomplish, the delays were infuriating and incomprehensible, and in mid-July she wrote: "Our construction is moving forward very slowly; you have to follow the workmen step by step in order to avoid the most unbelievable stupidities. [The other day] they were replacing an old staircase, but when they finished they had built it so narrow that it couldn't be used."

That same month they experienced for the first time the flooding that inevitably came with the rainy season. "The roads were like torrents," Bernard noted. They could not leave the house even to get to Mass; but at least one day the parish priest came in his auto to say Mass for them. By September, however, the new wing was finished and the nuns were able to move into their light, spacious refectory as well as to move their boarders to more appropriate living space. That same month another event raised their spirits. They received word that Bernard was to receive a prize (Prix Radius) given each year to a French missionary whose work merited to be

honored by his country. While Bernard demurred before such an honor, she gladly accepted the 2,000 francs that would help pay the interest on their loans.

Although in December an event of national significance occurred--the official promulgation of the new Constitution--the Annals of *Regina Coeli* fail even to mention it. Their concern that month was exclusively on the forthcoming visit of His Excellency Bishop Dreyer, the Apostolic Delegate, who had arrived in Bangkok from France on December 19. Anxious to see the newly opened "Mission of the North" he arrived in Chiang Mai, accompanied by Bishop Perros, in time to celebrate Christmas. "Flags floated everywhere," Bernard wrote. "The whole place [was] decked out with the papal colors and a papal flag [was] hanging from the top of a tree."

On Christmas Eve the pupils of *Regina Coeli* with their homemade lanterns marched in procession. "It was pitch dark and the glow of the lanterns was beautiful to look at," Marie de Lourdes wrote later to her parents. Clotilde Angela, their artist, had constructed a giant image of the Nativity that the procession passed on the way to the church. "It was made with wrapping paper and wax paper," Marie de Lourdes continued. "The background was brown wrapping paper, the personages [were constructed of] paper on which Clotilde had painted. When a lamp was put behind this, the picture showed out beautifully."

This was only the beginning. Father Mirabel, indefatigable as always, took the opportunity of giving the children (from both *Regina Coeli* and the Brothers' school) a slide show of images of Rome and Lourdes with his "magic lantern." At ten o'clock the pupils returned to their respective schools, to be kept quiet and amused, until time to reassemble for a Pontifical High Mass celebrated by His Excellency Bishop Dreyer. The fact that there were no more than a dozen Catholics in attendance at these ceremonies seemed in no way to dampen the spirits of either children or nuns.

While the nuns depended on the classroom for their religious influence, Father Mirabel plunged into virgin territory to preach the Gospel. Early in February he set out on a trip that would take him into Burma where there was still no connection with the missions of Siam. It was an arduous journey, taking as long as two months, partly by boat, partly by horseback and foot. "Two priests are going with a guide," Marie de Lourdes wrote to a friend in New York. "A person who had taken the journey told me the other day that one has to carry provisions for days and while they tented in the woods overnight the men had to keep watch with guns because they were once attacked by a tiger. What wouldn't I give to be the one to make the journey! It must be grand to be a man!" was her rather unfeminine conclusion.

But even though she could not venture out beyond the classroom, Marie de Lourdes found enormous satisfaction in her work. "Our school is in full swing and a cause of joy," she had written earlier that fall. "I wouldn't change my mission of Chieng Mai for anything on earth. It is a mission that puts on fire every drop of blood in one's veins! The people are simple, eager, open to the truth...and here we are a little band pushing headlong into the lines of the enemy."

In the first week of January, they had the happiness of welcoming Raphael who was to spend a few weeks "for a much-needed rest." The news she brought was encouraging: their three postulants (two Chinese and a Vietnamese) who had entered some months before as lay sisters seemed increasingly at home. Their initial struggle to wear shoes and stockings as well as a veil and a western dress was diminishing and Raphael had high hopes for them.* The *Mater Dei* community had been further increased at the end of 1932 with the arrival of two sisters from France: Gérard Farget (the older sister of Bernadette) and Marie de St. Ignace Six who had been appointed sub-prioress.

* After completing their formation, these three sisters left the Ursulines to join an indigenous community.

Other good news was that Mary Sheehan and Beatrice Hanson had successfully passed their Siamese examination. The former, in her letter home, provided a graphic description of their examiner:

No one but Charles Dickens could describe him. He was wearing a blue panung, white stockings, black oxfords and a white jacket. The panung covers the knees in front but not in back and as his long white stockings were rolled, part of the legs were uncovered....Whatever was his appearance, he proved himself a gentleman and a credit to his education in England.

Whether it was his gentlemanly compassion or the sisters' ability, the fact was that both of them acquitted themselves creditably--thus giving them official right to teach in Siam.

With the surge of nationalism following the June revolution, government control of education became more rigorous. Although the Ministry of Education had been established as early as 1891, it exerted little influence until the 1930s. The 1921 law requiring all children between the ages of seven and fourteen to attend school had been largely unenforced for the next ten years. Now, however, with the move toward democracy, it was recognized that universal education was an essential in developing a spirit of national pride.

It had been clear for years that schools conducted by foreigners provided a better education than government schools where the teachers were poorly paid and inadequately prepared for their task. Foreigners brought in new ideas, new methods and opened doors to a wider universe. Although in most cases they also demanded the right to teach their own religion, their religious influence was negligible. Buddhism for the Siamese was not simply a religion but a way of life in which they were comfortable and secure. While they conformed to the demands of their religious teachers while in school, even freely attending religious services, there were very few converts among them. It was not religious influence which the

government feared but rather that students were not receiving adequate education in their own language and not developing a sense of national pride.

The influence that private schools (run mostly by foreigners) had on the population was clear from statistics provided in 1934: 36,000 boys were registered in government schools and 37,000 in private schools. Statistics for girls, however, was far more telling: 16,000 girls were registered in government schools and 26,000 in private schools. The position of women was clearly shifting, largely through the influence of mission schools. A later historian affirmed this influence when she wrote in 1940: "The majority of women who have distinguished themselves academically in Siam have been trained in the mission schools which still give the best education for girls in the country."^{*}

By 1934 not only was the regulation that all teachers must be proficient in the Siamese language being rigorously enforced but a further requirement demanded that Siamese be used in schools for a minimum of 25 hours a week. The schools most affected by this demand were Chinese schools which, for the most part, depended on their own language. The status of Chinese schools had been under scrutiny for some time. As early as 1919 a law required that all private schools must ensure that students could read, write, speak the Siamese language with reasonable facility. This regulation was clearly aimed at assimilating the large Chinese population that was becoming increasingly powerful in Siamese economy. At that time a large number of Chinese schools were forced to close, unable or unwilling to obey the regulations.

Following the 1932 revolution, the Chinese population was again targeted. Clearly the largest and most important minority in Siam, they now numbered about 25% of the population. Young Siamese, fired with

^{*} Virginia Thompson. **The New Siam**. New York, 1941.

nationalist enthusiasm, saw them as a danger, particularly since communism was becoming a powerful force in China. and Siam was determined not to be infected by it.

For the nuns, the new regulations were felt most keenly in the Chinese school at Calvary. Here Agnès Delattre directed the school, assisted by Véronique Poutrain and Marguerite Marie Penn. They were helped by a number of native Siamese teachers but the work was grueling, for they were dealing with the poorest and most unlettered of the Chinese children of the parish. "Discipline is almost nil," Agnès wrote in despair to Xavier Marteau in Rome.

While political unrest continued during the spring and summer of 1933, some major internal changes took place for the Ursulines. On July 18 two American missionaries arrived: Elizabeth Brosmith from New Rochelle, New York, a seasoned missionary who had spent several years in the Montana missions for Native Americans; and Theophane Westerman, also from Montana, who had made her temporary vows only two years previously. July also saw the departure of Marguerite Tan, a former student of *Mater Dei*, who was sailing for France to begin her postulantship at Beaugency. "Little Lucie" *Dardarananda* was doing so well in her French novitiate that they had high hopes for Marguerite, their second Siamese postulant.

No sooner had they finished their rejoicing, however, than another event shook their good spirits. On July 23 Marie de Lourdes received word from Rome that she was appointed to fill a newly created position: Superior of the Missions of China and Siam. This would entail travel and administrative responsibilities that would make it impossible for her to continue in her present work at Chieng Mai. She lost no time in looking for her successor and five days after receiving her appointment she arrived in Bangkok to select her replacement as head mistress of *Regina Coeli*. Her choice was Mary Sheehan--generous, devoted, and an excellent teacher. With hardly time to say goodbye to the community where she had lived since her arrival less than two years before, Sister Mary packed her

suitcase and, during the second week of August, arrived in Chiang Mai to begin her new responsibilities.

Hardly had she arrived before she was writing back to her community in Decatur asking them to send her some essential books--among them the essays of Oliver Goldsmith, some of which were required reading for Mathayom VIII. She was struggling as well with the increased demands of the Ministry of Education as she wrote to her parents that fall: "The Siamese government is surely intent in the teaching of its own language. We turned our Junior School upside down to please them and had to hire an extra Siamese teacher in order to have the required number of hours for Siamese. Thank God they didn't touch the High School because although I passed the exam, I know very little Siamese, I assure you!"

Although *Regina Coeli* was a much smaller school than *Mater Dei* and its students less sophisticated and more docile than those in Bangkok, yet the work was rigorous. Classes began at 8:00a.m. and lasted until 4:00p.m., with boarders to be supervised during all their free hours. "Only three of us to divide the time," wrote Clotilde Angela. "Add to this a Siamese lesson from 4:30 to 5:00, nearly forty exercise books to correct daily--and a preparation book to write. Now you see why I'm such a backward correspondent," she concluded.

Although political unrest continued during the summer of 1933, the American nuns wrote home assuring their families that there was no cause for alarm, while Bernard guaranteed Rome, somewhat naively, that no matter what happened they would be protected by the French government. In October, however, all that changed. A conservative military force, led by one of the princes--a grandson of Chulalongkorn--staged a powerful revolt against what he considered the communist tendencies of the new "liberal" government. On October 12 the Bangkok airport was seized and troops began moving into the northern suburbs. Martial law was established and the city turned into an armed camp. Although the fighting itself was centered in Bangkok and its environs, repercussions were felt

throughout Siam. All communication was cut and in Chieng Mai the nuns waited anxiously for reports of the conflict.

On October 15 with the hope that mail deliveries might soon resume, Beatrice Hanson wrote at some length to her family:

Sunny Siam is somewhat shady just now with war clouds as well as rain clouds hovering heavily over it. But you probably know that we are having a real revolution.... Firing began on Columbus Day [October 12] in the early afternoon and lasted until nightfall. Friday the fight was resumed at about the same time and continued uninterruptedly until dark. Yesterday and today reports were heard at long intervals. What a depressing sound it is! Though the guns are directed towards the aeroplanes they have not brought down a single one but each boom of the cannons means that somewhere lives and property are being destroyed. Sometimes the reports seem quite near. All schools and legations have been ordered to fly their flags as a protection from air raids. No, we are not afraid.

The fighting continued fiercely for another two weeks with losses on both sides. By the end of October, however, it was clear that the rebels had little popular support and on October 25 Prince Boworadet, realizing that he was doomed to defeat, fled into exile in French Indochina. Nothing positive had been gained by the revolt. Support for the government had actually increased and while there was no evidence that the King had favored the rebels, a certain distrust of him grew and would ultimately lead to his abdication two years later.

Meanwhile at Chieng Mai the community--despite their anxiety--was rejoicing over the return of Teresita Lightwood who had been in England for her health. Returning to Siam in the first week of October, she had caught the last train out of Bangkok and arrived without notice at *Regina Coeli*, healthy and happy, just as the revolution began.

Marie de Lourdes Simons also missed the revolution. In her new position as Superior of the Missions, she had left to visit the China houses in mid-September, taking with her Elizabeth Brosmith who, during her few months in Bangkok, had not been able to adjust to the climate. Arriving in Swatow on September 22, Marie de Lourdes stayed in China for over a month, visiting the three houses, conferring with the superior, Marie du Rosaire Audet, as well as with Bishop Rayssac, about the future of the China missions.

She also met for the first time one of the original foundresses of the Siam mission, Xavier Pirc*, who had been in China since the summer of 1925. During that time she had proved herself a zealous and inventive missionary and Marie de Lourdes now felt that it was time for her to return to her original mission, where her knowledge of Chinese--especially the Swatow dialect--would be invaluable at the school¹ at Calvary. Replacing her in Swatow would be Marie de St. Ignace who had arrived in Bangkok two years earlier. Trained in music, her abilities, it was judged, would be better utilized in China than in Siam. It was immediately clear that under Marie de Lourdes' leadership transfers between the two missions would be the norm rather than the exception.

On November 1, 1933 Marie de Lourdes, Xavier Pirc and Elizabeth Brosmith arrived in Bangkok. For Xavier it must have been an astonishing moment. The three struggling sisters she had left in their small dingy house eight years before had now metamorphosed into a sizeable community established in a new roomy convent and with a successfully growing school. And, in addition, there was another school, far north, in a part of Siam Xavier had never seen. She was now thirty-nine years old, seasoned in mission life, still impetuous, still dominant, but ready to resume her place as a foundress of the Siam mission and contribute to its growth for the next fifty-four years.

* The original form, "Xaveria," had been changed to the French form "Xavier." This will be used from now on.

With November, despite lingering pockets of unrest, Siam had apparently settled into a contented peace. No doubt in order to cement the status of the new government an elaborate five-day celebration of the new constitution was planned for the first part of December. All schools were expected to participate in at least part of the festivity and Mary Sheehan wrote home in some detail about the procession at *Regina Coeli* with all the children from the various schools dressed proudly in uniform, marching behind the Boy Scouts who carried a large Siamese flag. This more formal part of the celebration was followed by several days of sports: sack races, foot races, tugs of war, bicycle races--and for *Regina Coeli* a program of French songs and dances performed before the governor.

1934 began peacefully despite some political altercation over King *Prajadhipok's* decision to leave Siam for an extended trip to Europe and America--ostensibly for his health. Many of the nuns were sorry to see him go because he had been a strong advocate for freedom of religion, even engaging as his private secretary a young convert educated by the Brothers. Although the constitutions provided for religious freedom for everyone (except for the king who must be a Buddhist), there was always the fear that the growing spirit of nationalism would make it more difficult for foreign religions.

That spring, despite a period of serious sickness in March, Marie de Lourdes, accompanied by Raphael, set out to visit the Ursuline mission in Harbin in the northern province of Manchuria. They took with them Gérard Farget who for reasons of health was being transferred to the China mission. A chronic circulatory problem had worsened in the hot, humid climate of Bangkok and despite rest and medical treatment the open sores on Gérard's legs would not close. Marie de Lourdes, concerned for her health, hoped that the climate in China would alleviate the condition. Bernard was loud in her objections, fearful of losing a valuable French subject, but as would happen frequently in the future, Marie de Lourdes with authority on her side carried the day. Gérard herself seemed to have realized the wisdom of the decision and immediately after her arrival in Swatow wrote to St. Jean Martin in Rome: "I arrived last Saturday and am

eager to thank you for having sent me to China. I am finding this mission what I have always wanted."

With Gérard safe in the convent in Swatow, Marie de Lourdes continued on almost immediately--first to Hong Kong, then to Shanghai and finally to Dairen in the Japanese-occupied province of Manchukuo. Here, after the usual formalities of passports and visas, they boarded a train for the twenty-four hour journey to Harbin, arriving on May 31, then the feast of St. Angela in the universal Church.

The Harbin mission was not yet ten years old, having been started in 1928 at the express wish of Pius XI, then Papal Nuncio to Poland. A number of Polish Ursulines had responded to this need for a school that would provide an education for the children of Russian emigrés escaping from the painful conditions in Communist Russia. Two years later the request was made for some English-speaking Ursulines. Among the three who responded was Rita Buttell from Nebraska, USA, who after several years in Harbin would come to serve the mission in Siam.

Now by the summer of 1934 the Ursulines had established two schools: the Russian school with about 100 boarders staffed by ten Ursulines; a small Chinese school in the old part of the city where several sisters worked in a newly-established Chinese parish. The visitors stayed for a week, attending the Russian liturgies, meeting with the clergy, visiting the classes of both schools--even attending a dress rehearsal of the elaborate Russian commencement ceremony. "I know of no greater work than that of this mission," Marie de Lourdes wrote admiringly in her journal as they concluded their visit to this strange cosmopolitan outpost.

On June 7 they boarded the train for Dairen and the long trek back to Swatow and then on to Bangkok. While the trip was arduous, Marie de Lourdes did not find it unpleasant. The diary she kept is full of interesting and amusing episodes. She considered that they had been well-treated and the Japanese intrigued her with their overt curiosity and punctilious attention to detail. She praised their order, their politeness, their honesty.

The political state of Manchukuo and their aggressive imperialism seemed hidden from her. In an ironic comment she observed that the Japanese did everything so well that they could easily run the world. Seven years later they came close to succeeding.

During the travelers' absence Marie Joseph (Lucie) Dardarananda had returned to Siam, having made her temporary vows at Beaugency in April. Accompanying her was another junior professed, Augustin Zing, originally from Shanghai. She was destined for the China mission, following a year's experience teaching at the Chinese school at Calvary.

Chieng Mai, meanwhile was experiencing a painful loss. Father Mirabel, that indefatigable missionary and sensitive spiritual director, had left Thailand. For several years he had felt called to a more contemplative life but the bishop had asked him to stay on and test his vocation. He had done so with a zeal and kindness that made him universally loved. But in the spring of 1934 he made his decision: he would enter the Carthusians, one of the most rigorous of contemplative orders.

On June 29 the parish gathered to celebrate his departure. Of that day the convent annalist noted: "During our breakfast Father Mirabel comes to hand his chalice to Sister Marie Bernard. We all kneel down to receive his last blessing; we could not exchange one word--the emotion is too strong." At 8:30 the schools gathered to say farewell but as he tried to speak to them, even Mirabel had to struggle to control his emotions. "After a while, mastering himself, he said only these words in French: 'Go on loving each other.' Then the French Consul came in his car to take Father. At 10:30 he passed along raising his hand towards heaven."

The following month they said another painful farewell: Marie de Lourdes was leaving for Europe to make her tertianship in Rome. She would be gone for most of the year and while she rejoiced in the opportunity, she admitted that she found these long stretches of travel difficult. In a letter to Mother Irene Gill, superior at New Rochelle, she wrote on August 27 from shipboard on her way to France: "I feel at times that I should like to run

miles from everybody. The decks are so small that there is no place to go. It was hard to leave the mission. I am deeply grateful to have the opportunity of the Third Year but I shall be glad, too, when we shall be sailing toward the Orient once more."

Even in the midst of loss and catastrophe humorous moments helped them keep their balance. Thus, the description of the petite, artistic Clotilde Angela preparing her students for martial drills: "I am the recruit sergeant," she wrote to a friend. "You would fall over if you heard me: Forward March! Right about turn! Halt!, etc. in Siamese." Or the description of repairing their lovely "Blue House" which was beginning to slant like the Tower of Pisa, no doubt because of their yearly floods and flimsy initial construction. The repairs were not hastened by the primitive tools being used--a bamboo pole for digging and a large coconut for a shovel. "We are living in a state of siege," Clotilde Angela explained. "About 39 Chinese workmen have dug huge holes around all the supports and put huge ropes to try to straighten [the house]. We sleep at night in the arms of Providence--as all the downstairs walls have been removed and the upstairs doors won't close any more since the house has begun to sit straight."

Just at the moment of such confusion, the resident French minister announced his generous offer to build them a little grotto in honor of Our Lady--no doubt at the instigation of Bernard who loved such external symbols of devotion. Another construction going on in their yard even for such a pious purpose only increased the chaos in which they were living. With the school still so lacking in educational materials, it seemed to Clotilde Angela that this money could have been more practically spent. "I wish they would think instead about providing school supplies," she commented wistfully as she watched the construction of the grotto.

On November 25 they celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Ursuline Mission in Siam. The four original founders were at last together again. Agnès Delattre, quiet, faithful, practical had full charge of the difficult school at Calvary. Marie Thérèse humble and self-effacing--once she had been relieved of her office--took scrupulous charge of financial affairs.

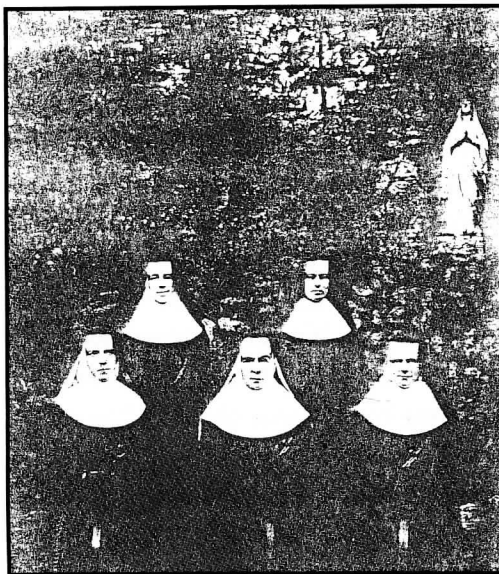
Raphael, gifted in languages, in administration, in spirituality had carried the burden of superior at *Mater Dei* for the last three years. Xavier, recently returned from her period in China and ready for anything, was presently helping Agnès in Calvary.

What had been accomplished was beyond anything they could have imagined. It was a far, far cry from those frightened and turbulent letters Thérèse had written to Angèle de Notre-Dame in the summer and fall of 1925. "What shall we do?" she had cried; "please help us." And in time they had been helped--by Bernard Mancel with her years of practical experience and capacious spirit; by Perros, who, despite their initial misunderstandings, had proved himself a benevolent pastor; by St. Jean Martin whose own missionary spirit had enabled her to find new recruits for the struggling mission.

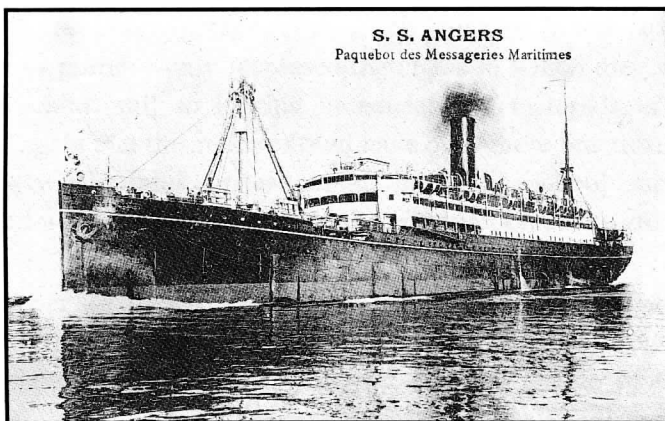
They had indeed been helped but not until they had reached that dark and treacherous tunnel where there is nothing to cling to but trust "We must live in the hands of Providence," Bernard had once counselled. It was their first and deepest lesson.



Early days at Calvary 1924-1928



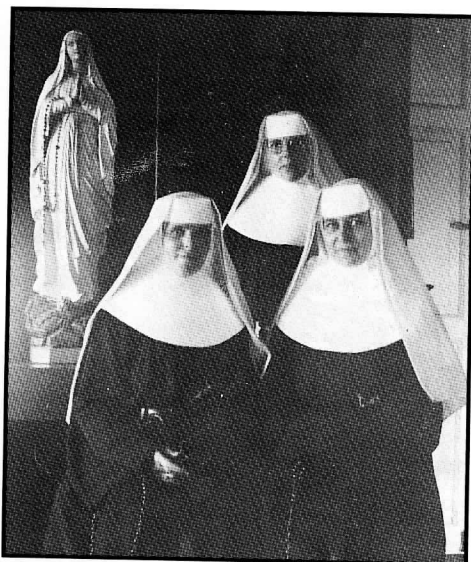
Four foundresses before leaving France
Sitting left to right: *Agnès Delattre; Prioress of Tournai, Thérèse Mertens*
Standing: *Xaveria Pirc, Raphael Vurnik*



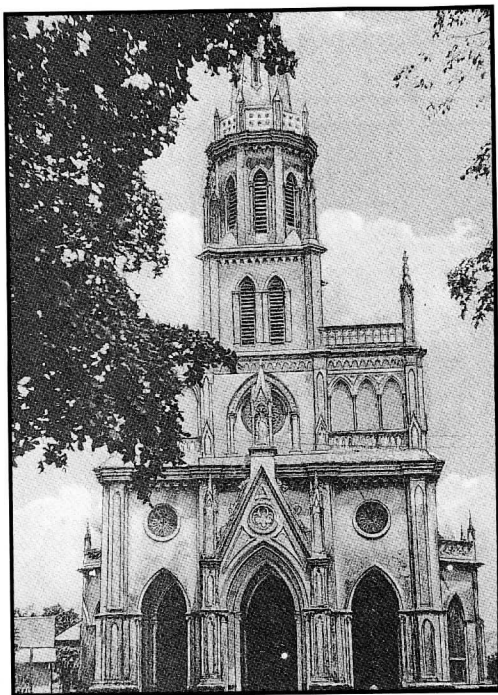
The ship which brought the first Ursulines to Thailand



First convent at Calvary

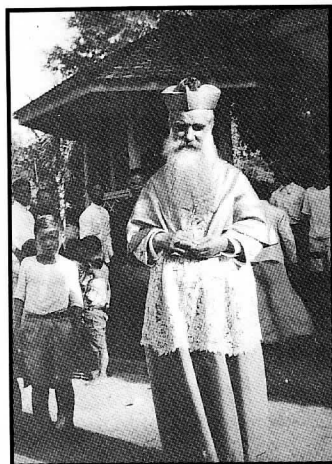


From left to right: Thérèse Mertens, Agnès Delattre, Raphael Vurnik,



Parish church: Our Lady of the Rosary

*Bishop René Perros who
invited the Ursulines to
Thailand*



*Calvary School 1926:
Thérèse Mertens and
Bernard Mancel
with their orphans*



Bernard Mancel at Calvary



Agnès Delattre with a Chinese family

Beginnings at Mater Dei 1928-1945

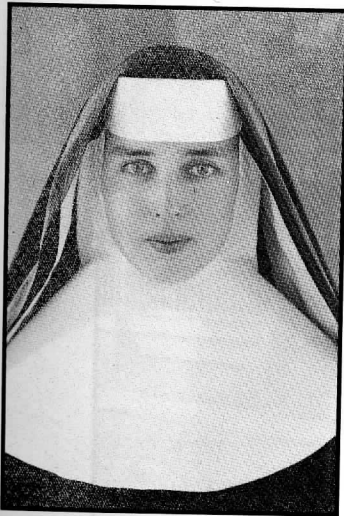


The original buildings at Mater Dei

Mater Dei 1928 - 1945



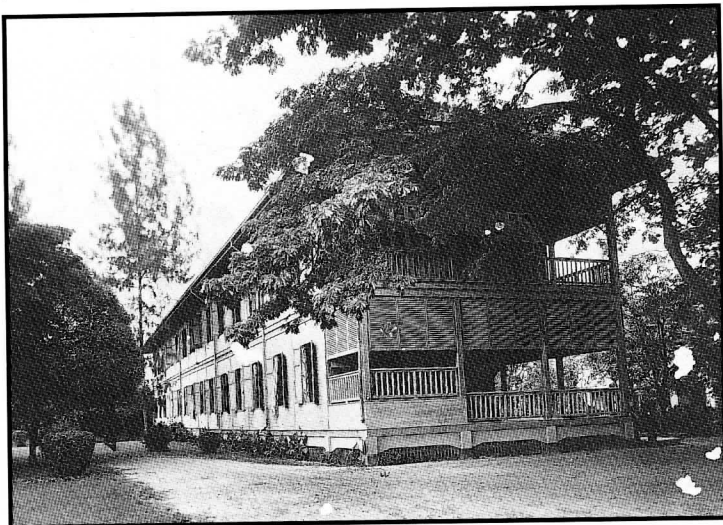
Teresita Lightwood and Marguerite Marie Penn



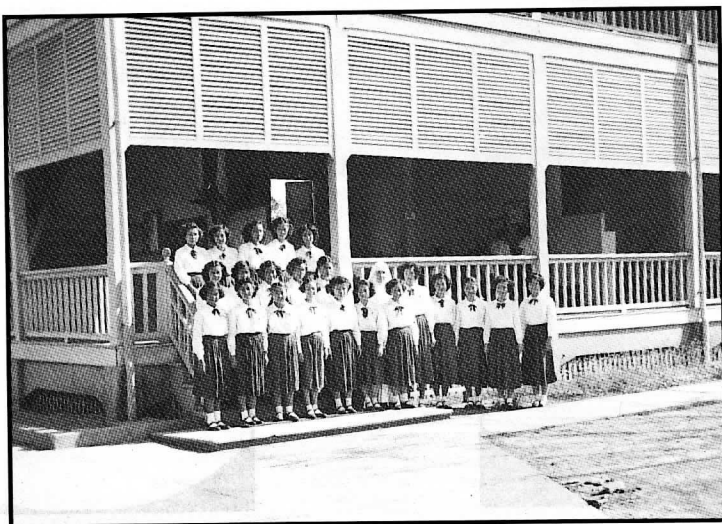
Véronique Poutrain

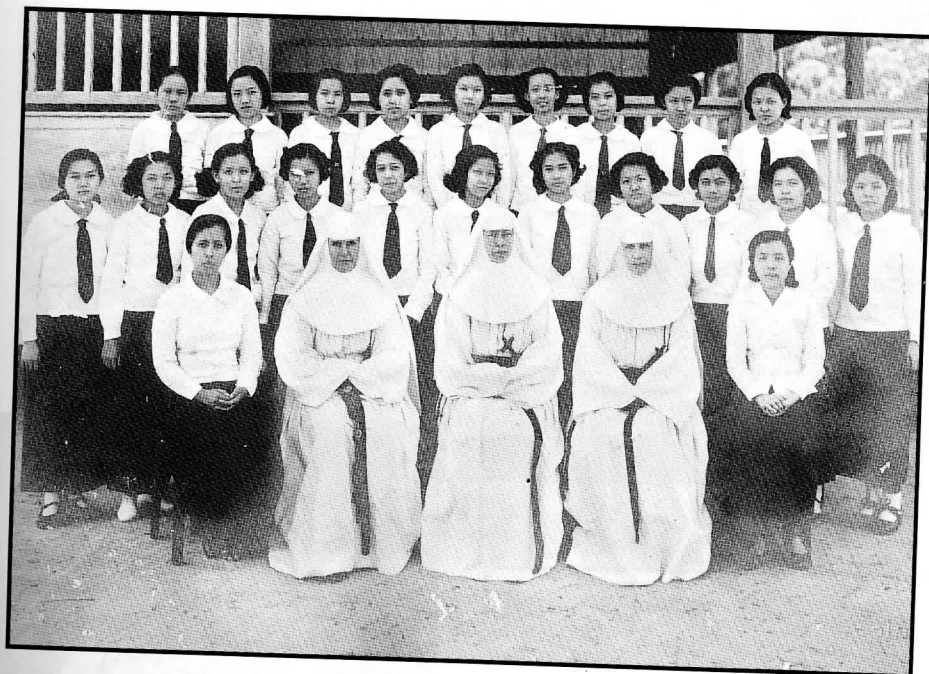


Beatrice Hanson



Early days at Mater Dei





*Rita Buttell, St. Jean Ruegg,
Xavier Pirc with their students at Mater Dei, 1937*

First pupils of Mater Dei to enter the Ursuline Order



*Marie Joseph (Bunprachak)
Dardarananda*



Angela Tan



Visitors from Rome with the community at Mater Dei, 1930

First row:

*Raphael Vurnik, Gemma Feeney, Bernard Mancel,
Roseline Herard, Xavier Dutting, Thérèse Matthieu,
Thérèse Mertens*

Second row:

*Teresa Cito, Agnès Delattre, Mary Francis Johnson, Bernadette
Farget, Véronique Poutrain, Marie de Lourdes Simons, Marguerite
Marie Penn, Marie Louise Geminatti, Marie Jeanne Terrace,
Teresita Lightwood*



Gemma Feeney with students of the Finishing Course



A wedding at Mater Dei, April 1941: Haruko and Nobuko Utangawa

Foundation of Regina Coeli 1932-1945



Departure by train for Chieng Mai



First house of Regina Coeli

Foundresses of Regina Coeli 1932-1945



Communité des Ursulines Regina Coeli - Xieng-Mai.

Mirabel
Fondatrice spirituelle

Marie-Bernard-Manuel s.o. P. Maria.

Marie de Lourdes Simonet s.o.

Mary Clotilde-Angèle M^{re} Camille s.o.

Mari-Bernadette Farget s.o.

Mari-Jeanne Terrace s.o.

L'an de Notre-Seigneur mille-neuf-cent-trente-deux, le sept du mois d'Avril, la Mère Marie-Bernard-Manuel Supérieure, les Mères Marie de Lourdes Simonet, Marie Clotilde-Angèle M^{re} Camille et Marie-Bernadette Farget, et la Sœur Marie-Jeanne Terrace religieuses Ursulines de l'Union Romaine, sont venues en cette ville de Xieng-Mai pour y établir une maison de l'Ordre avec la permission écrite de Son Excellence Monseigneur René Doras, Evêque de Bangkok.

Aujourd'hui, le vingt-trois du mois d'Avril, la première messe a été dite dans la chapelle et le très saint Sacrement y a été déposé par le R. P. G. Mirabel m. a.

Foundation of Regina Coeli, April 1932



New building at Regina Coeli



Pedicabs bringing the children to school



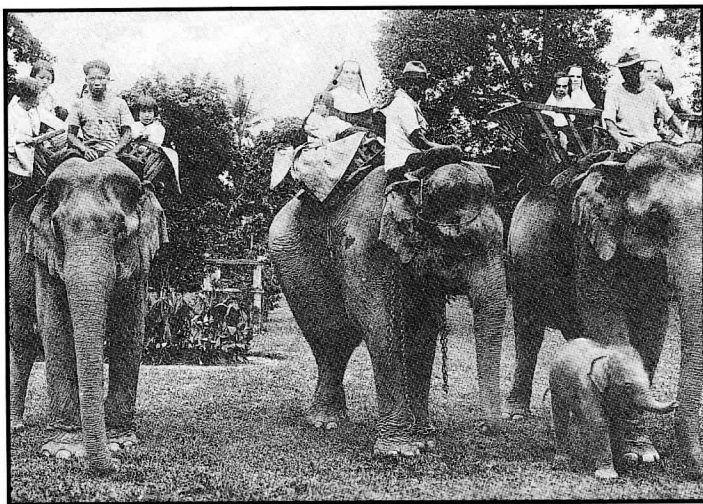
Father Mirabel who was instrumental in bringing the nuns to Chieng Mai



Floods at Regina Coeli



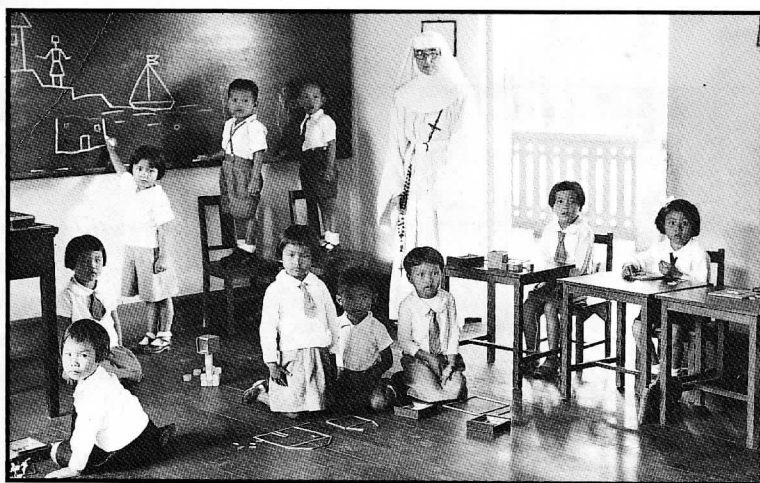
Mountain walk at Chieng Mai



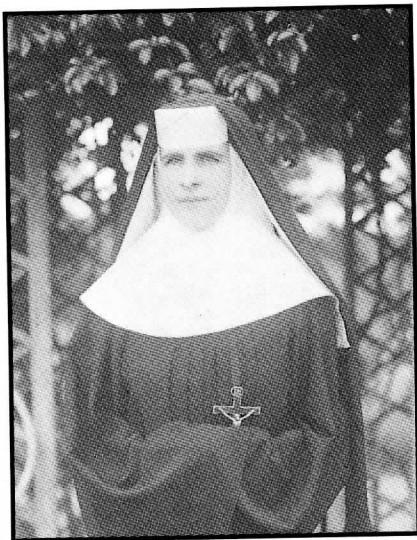
Community outing at Chieng Mai



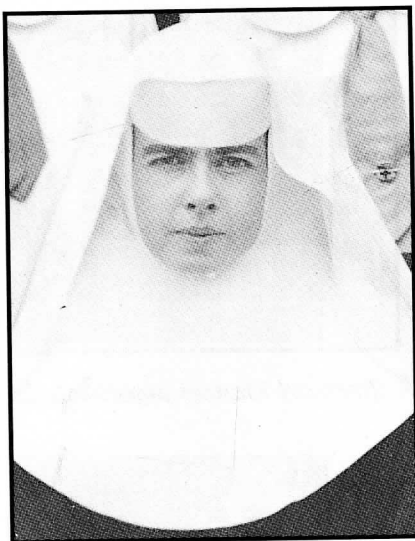
Bernard Mancel and Bernadette Farget with children at Regina Coeli



Stanislas Bosnak with her KG class



*Mary Sheehan,
first Ursuline to die in Thailand*



Clotilde Angela McCan



*Funeral of
Clotilde Angela McCan
at Chiang Mai*



Visit of the Indonesian Provincial to Regina Coeli, 1940

First row:

Ursula Savage with three visitors from Indonesia

Second row:

*Charles Roberts, Jeanne Marie van der Aalst,
Bernadette Farget, Theophane, Westerman, Stanislas Bosnak
Sisters in black habit are from a local congregation*

CHAPTER NINE

“WE NEVER LOSE HEART”

As Bishop Perros pointed out in his annual report, 1935 was a year of ecclesiastical celebrations in Siam. First and foremost it was the Jubilee Year of Redemption, resulting in the return to the Church of many "wandering souls" as well as pagans receiving the waters of baptism. On January 28 Perros himself celebrated the silver jubilee of his episcopal consecration as well as the jubilee of ordination of a number of native priests. Father Guillou, long-time pastor of Calvary, celebrated his Golden Jubilee.

In February the Brothers of St. Gabriel--the Chères Frères--celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the College of the Assumption. The day of celebration was, as Perros pointed out, "a day of triumph such as the Catholic Mission in Siam had never seen." Hundreds of their 10,000 alumnae crowded the grounds to congratulate the Brothers and revisit the scenes of their youth.

Two events of that year Perros failed to mention. At the beginning of the year, January 22, Theophane Westerman pronounced her perpetual vows. She had come to Siam in July 1933 while still under temporary vows and for some months her profession had been postponed because of her precarious health. Now, however, she seemed to have hit her stride and

entered into mission life with an irrepressible spirit. The following November the Ursulines participated in a universal celebration of the 400th anniversary of their founding by Angela Merici in Brescia, Italy in 1535.

Despite the spirit of jubilee, however, Siam was still under a cloud of political uncertainty and on March 2 the event occurred which many had considered inevitable: the King, who had left Siam for England in the spring of 1934--ostensibly for his health--issued his formal abdication. Five days later on March 7, 1935, his young nephew, Ananda Mahidol, was proclaimed king by the new government. The new king, then only ten years old, was currently at school in Switzerland. No apparent effort was made for his immediate recall and for the next few years he continued his schooling uninterrupted while a three-person regency governed in his name.

Meanwhile Siam did its best to adjust to the inevitable repercussions of a new government and of an increasingly militant spirit of nationalism. Minorities now found themselves treated with less tolerance than in the past and a concerted effort was made to assimilate them into the Siamese mainstream. The largest and most influential of the minorities was, of course, the Chinese. Even before the 1932 Revolution there had been some anxiety that they were becoming dangerously powerful, controlling a predominant proportion of Siamese business and establishing a significant sub-culture with schools, newspapers, books and magazines. As transportation had improved, the Chinese had moved out of the cities into rural areas where their culture blossomed with enterprising booksellers following them, making available everything they needed in their own language. In Bangkok itself even a Chinese Chamber of Commerce had been established. It must sometimes have seemed to the Thai that they were in danger of having a nation within a nation.

Control of education seemed one of the most viable ways of restraining Chinese influence. Although years earlier regulations by the Department of Education had demanded that Chinese schools teach a certain number of hours in Siamese daily, such directives had gone largely unenforced. In

such schools Siamese books were stored away and brought out only at the approach of inspectors. Now, however, the government was determined that such directives be strictly enforced. Schools found to be refractory in obeying the laws were summarily closed. In indignation, the Chinese presented a formal protest with over 6,000 signatures, but the government remained adamant. As a further invasion, Chinese stores were required to post their signs in Siamese as well as Chinese--another directive bitterly resented by the Chinese.

If the government continued to enforce its educational directives, the nuns' work at Calvary would be seriously curtailed if not stopped altogether. On January 5, Raphael wrote to St. Jean in Rome that a law was under consideration which would require all children between the ages of seven and fourteen to attend government schools. Such a law would have immense consequences for all foreign schools. She herself was interpreting this as a means of ridding the country of Chinese schools; but, she admitted, some missionaries were seeing it as a blow directed against Christianity. In either case it imposed constrictions they had not felt before. "The beautiful country of the free has become very somber," she concluded.

The following May difficulties continued at Calvary with the nuns struggling to follow the regulations and the Chinese refusing to obey them. "The rules are so strict that it is hard to find time to teach catechism," Raphael complained. By July the battle still raged and Beatrice Hanson tried to provide an explanation in her letters to her family and friends in the United States:

There is a movement to crush the Chinese element in Siam and the government is beginning with the schools. Chinese schools were ordered closed and it was only with difficulty and some persuasion that Calvary was reopened. All Chinese are obliged to learn Siamese but may study their mother tongue after school hours. Although it is only right that the Chinese learn the language of the country where

they make their living, on the other hand, the Siamese would find themselves in a sorry plight if it were not for the enterprising Chinese.

That spring was beset with troubles, especially for *Mater Dei*. Teresita Lightwood, although fully recovered from her bout of tuberculosis, now suffered from a mysterious illness which the doctors could neither diagnose nor alleviate. Rest and the cooler air of Chieng Mai did her no good and Raphael wrote ominously that she feared she would be a permanent invalid. Marguerite Marie Penn was also a source of concern. She was less and less in control of hysterical outbursts occasioned by fatigue and a climate which her Dutch blood had never been able to adjust to. The two youngest members of the *Mater Dei* community--Augustin Zing and Marie Joseph Dardarananda--having spent three valiant years in Beaugency adjusting to French food and climate were now faced with the inverse battle of readjusting to the Orient. "Everyone who is not downright in bed is sitting on the ragged edge or dragging along on her last legs," Beatrice Hanson commented with her usual wry humor.

In February Xavier Pirc--one of the most invincible members of the community--had a terrifying accident. One of their guard dogs, Flipkin by name, had been exhibiting signs of sickness and when Xavier tried to administer some medication, he turned on her, burying his teeth in her arm so fiercely that she could not shake him off. When finally she was able to pull free, she had a wound several inches long and a half-inch deep in the flesh of her arm. Helped by Gemma and shaking with shock, she came into the refectory where the nuns were sitting. After one look, Raphael sent two girls running into the street to find a taxi to take them to the hospital.

White as a sheet from pain and loss of blood, Xavier, accompanied by Gemma and Raphael, arrived at the Pasteur Institute, a Siamese clinic which took care of poisonous animal and snake bites. At once the doctor warned them that the dog might be rabid and instructed them to capture him and bring him in to be examined. But Flipkin could not be found. It was not until a day later that his body was discovered and they were able to

verify the fact that he was indeed rabid. At once Xavier began the fourteen essential injections to counteract the disease and as a precaution, Raphael, Augustin and Beatrice--all of whom had been licked by Flipkin shortly before this episode-- were also subjected to the painful treatment. It was a terrifying experience from which the community did not recover quickly. Especially difficult, Raphael wrote later, was the six-months' waiting period before they could be sure that Xavier was out of danger.

Affairs at *Regina Coeli* were less dramatic but no less demanding. The need to have their house "straightened" the year before had taken whatever meager amount of additional money they had, and 1935 became an exceptionally austere year for them. Several times that spring and summer Mary Sheehan wrote to her former community in Decatur, Illinois, asking if they could send her some inkwells, some sheet music to help with their entertainments, and an elementary book in physics--a subject she was forced to teach with very little preparation. "Please send it as soon as possible," she begged, "because I have to prepare a class for examination."

Here as in Bangkok the Ministry of Education showed itself increasingly intransigent. "We are busier here than ever before," Mary Sheehan wrote that spring in her role as mistress general. "The new government has very strict educational laws and times are not so bright for mission schools. I am kept busy making statements and reports with the aid of a Siamese teacher even in vacation." And in a later letter to Barbara Klaholt, then provincial of the Central Province, she reiterated the continuing problems:

We are having a hard time to maintain our rights. Now that the government has made a start in education, they are trying to enforce ridiculous rules and timetables. I've written so often to the bishop that I'm ashamed.... I think the French Consul will have to arrange the matter in the end.

But despite the tension, they had significant proof of the school's success. Toward the end of April they had the required exhibition of the children's work: drawings, maps, every kind of handwork (both Siamese and

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But despite the tension, they had significant proof of the school's success. Toward the end of April they had the required exhibition of the children's work: drawings, maps, every kind of handwork (both Siamese and

European), along with notebooks in Siamese, French, and English. "The Europeans and some Americans were full of compliments for our children's work," Mary wrote in satisfaction. A further and more extensive compliment came from Bishop Perros in his annual report: "The Ursuline religious continue their works of Catholic education, at Chieng Mai as at Bangkok, with a devotion blessed by God. They are dearly loved and in spite of the similar religious establishments run by the Protestants or by the government they enjoy universal esteem."

In August of that year, however, they were faced with an event for which nothing had prepared them. They received the shattering news that Bernard Mancel was to leave them for China where she would assume the office of superior in Swatow. While it was true that her three-year term was up that year, the sisters had simply presumed that both she and Raphael would be appointed for a second triennial. Marie de Lourdes, however, in her role as Superior of the Missions had for some time had other plans. Following her initial visitation in China in 1934 she felt that the mission needed substantial change. She was not satisfied with the school in Swatow, comparing it unfavorably with what had been accomplished in Bangkok. They needed, she felt, a new school of the caliber which would attract a superior class of students.

For this work she considered that Bernard Mancel with her boundless energy and enthusiasm would be the ideal superior. "She is the only one who could do it," she affirmed. But when she had discussed her plans with Charles Briliaud, then provincial of the North of France, she met with opposition. Charles cautioned her to make no changes until the following year when Bernard's term as superior in Chieng Mai would expire. Marie de Lourdes acceded to the delay and meanwhile convinced St. Jean Martin of the wisdom of her plan.

Thus in the first week of August Bernard received her unexpected obedience and on August 6 she wrote to St. Jean Martin:

I have just received my appointment...I thank you with all my heart that after thirty-five years the dreams of my youth are going to be realized. I offered myself to Mother St. Julien for China and now, look, I am getting it for my silver jubilee as a missionary....This month I drew Rose of Lima as my patron with these words of Our Lord: 'My grace is measured to suffering and my gifts proportioned to trial.'....This charge of China will be very different from the oasis I am leaving but I am joyful in my ability still to suffer something for God.

On August 20 the community and the school celebrated Bernard's feastday, not yet aware of her new appointment. The following day she gathered the sisters together to announce her departure for China. The community was stunned. Bernard had been the moving spirit not only for the foundation of *Regina Coeli* but for the foundation and development of *Mater Dei* as well. Her dreams were immense but her energy and spirit of evangelization matched them. It was impossible for them to imagine Siam without Bernard and they had simply taken for granted that she would continue as superior for another three-year term.

In an effort to subject her emotions to a spirit of faith, the convent annalist wrote, "God wants it! We have submitted.... We help each other to remain strong." Five days later Bernard left on the morning train for Bangkok. "We got up as in a dream," the annalist continued.

It is really today...Last Mass, last communion in the parish church. Back at home, she renewed the consecration of the community to the Blessed Virgin. We sang, 'Souvenezvous' --each one crying. Mr. John was there already with the car. We all went to the chapel and there near the tabernacle she had built, we embraced our sisters. At the station all our girls are there in perfect order, with many parents and friends who wanted to express for the last time their sympathy to the sister whom everybody venerates in Chiang

Mai. Seeing this beautiful row of children, Sister Bernard could not restrain these words: "My beautiful school!" A last whistle brought an end to the sacrifice. Our prioress was gone.

After only a few days at her beloved *Mater Dei*, on August 30, accompanied by Gemma Feeney, Bernard Mancel sailed for Hong Kong. For those who had been at the Siam mission since its beginning, Bernard's presence was the source of their vitality. She had delivered them from despair. She had taken the measure of their work and adjusted it to their abilities. She had assessed their narrow plot of land and their small dark convent and finding them insufficient had found new land for a larger institution. She had mended the rift with Bishop Perros and engaged him as their loyal benefactor. Her vision was wide and her energy immense. If it were true, as Marie de Lourdes once suggested, that she lacked that delicate sense of pastoral care which is often demanded in superiors, she had other qualities--optimism, trust in God's providence, zeal for souls--which elicited from her sisters the best they had to offer. They recognized that the story of the Ursulines in Siam would have been a much darker history without her presence. She was now sixty-one and had completed twenty-five years of missionary labor. On August 18 in a confidential letter to Mother François Xavier Marteau in Rome, she admitted: "This charge frightens me but I must cling to God."

On September 5 she arrived at Swatow where she was met on the wharf by Marie de Lourdes who, having completed her work in the United States, had sailed from Seattle on July 20, bringing with her Fabian Waters, a new missionary destined for Siam. They had arrived in Swatow on August 12 and the next three weeks were spent visiting the convents and undoubtedly planning the improvements Marie de Lourdes hoped Bernard would be able to make.

The trip up to the mountains to visit the foundation at Hopo had been unusually hazardous. Accompanied by Bishop Vogel and several missionary priests they had been stuck for several hours on a sandbar with

their boatmen ineffectually pushing and hauling. Then as they made their way through the forest, they had been held up by a group of armed soldiers who were on their guard against communist infiltrators. The greatest test of their determination, however, came in crossing a river where there was neither bridge nor boat to help them. "Here," Marie de Lourdes wrote succinctly, "the Bishop and priests took off their cassocks, shoes and stockings, rolled up their trousers and took the lead. In turn we took off our shoes and stockings, rolled up our habits and followed." It is a unique image: the three nuns hitching up their long black underskirts and serge habits as best they could, clutching stockings and shoes in their hands while their feet negotiated the slippery mud of the river bed.

The return trip was less hazardous and they were back in Swatow in time to welcome Bernard and her companion and to install her at once as superior of the China Mission. The following week Marie de Lourdes, along with Gemma and Fabian, set sail for the return trip to Bangkok which they reached on the morning of September 18. Raphael, meanwhile, had received a cable appointing her prioress at *Regina Coeli*. Replacing her at *Mater Dei* would be Marie de Lourdes who would add this responsibility to the already heavy task of supervising all the missions of the East. It was far from an ideal solution for Marie de Lourdes would be forced to travel extensively, thus leaving *Mater Dei* for months without a resident superior. Such a situation would exact a cost, as the community would later experience. Now no time was lost and the following day Raphael boarded the Royal Siamese State Express which would bring her to her new post.

By the fall of 1935 both communities had experienced dramatic changes in personnel. In May Marguerite Marie Penn, long suffering from ill-health, was relieved of her duties at Calvary and was sent to Java where it was hoped she would regain her health. But Java was not sufficient and after a few months rest she returned to her native Holland. Meanwhile on June 1 two new missionaries arrived, having just completed their tertianship in Rome. Annunciata Wögerer was born in England of Austrian parents. A licensed teacher in both French and English, she had taught at the Ursuline school at Salzburg before entering the community in 1916. Following her

profession, she had continued to teach there until going to Rome in 1934. During her year of tertianship she had volunteered for the missions and in the spring of 1935 she had sailed for Siam with Marie de St. Jean Ruegg, a fellow tertian and seasoned missionary.

Marie de St. Jean had also been born in England, just two years later than Annunciata. Of Protestant parentage, Irene, following her father's death, had been sent to the Ursuline school in Lutra, Greece. There she became a Catholic and three years later entered the Order and made her novitiate at Tournai in Belgium. Following her temporary vows in 1915, she was sent at once to the Ursuline community in Bahia, Brazil where she remained until traveling to Rome for her tertianship in 1934. Both St. Jean and Annunciata were treasures for the Siam mission. Gifted in languages, experienced as teachers, and almost ecstatically happy for the privilege of serving in the foreign missions the two new missionaries seemed heaven-sent.

That fall *Mater Dei* welcomed two other arrivals. Fabian Waters from New Rochelle, New York had arrived with Marie de Lourdes on September 18. A native of New York, she had completed her baccalaureate degree before entering the Ursuline novitiate at Beacon, New York in 1930. Immediately following her perpetual vows she had joined Marie de Lourdes in her journeys through America and then on to the Far East. Stanislas Bosnák, two years younger than Fabian, had been born in a small town in Czechoslovakia. In 1929, at the age of nineteen, she entered the novitiate at Beaugency where she made her perpetual vows in April 1935. With only a few months to prepare for her missionary apostolate, she sailed from France in September of that year, arriving in Siam on October 5.

This additional help was badly needed, for Agnès Delattre who had long been the mainstay of Calvary, as well as assistant superior of the community, was seriously ill with typhoid. Teresita Lightwood also continued in ill health and that fall both of them were sent to Chieng Mai to recover their strength. Theophane Westerman was also sent north, replaced at *Mater Dei* by Clotilde Angela McCan.

The new recruits had little time for adjustment. Stanislas, just two days after her arrival, was sent north to Chieng Mai to help at *Regina Coeli* while Annunciata was sent immediately to work at Calvary. It was not an easy post because the government continued its interference with Chinese schools--one month closing them, the next permitting them to reopen but with the injunction that neither Chinese nor catechism could be taught during regular hours. Despite the political upheaval, Annunciata loved working with these deprived children, although she confessed that she knew neither Chinese nor Siamese and was so busy that she had no time to study.

Fabian was immediately absorbed into the schedule of *Mater Dei*. In a letter to her sister, Mary Joseph (an Ursuline of the Bedford Park community in New York), written the month after her arrival, she wrote:

The school is on the English plan which means four years of elementary and eight years of secondary school....I teach arithmetic, algebra, geometry, gymnastics, English and domestic science.... However, I do not teach more than four periods on any one day....In my free time I study Siamese.

Fabian, like Annunciata, was hard-pressed to find the necessary free time to master the intricacies of Siamese and yet until they had passed the required government examination they could not be formally recognized as teachers.

The last months of 1935 were unusually busy. On October 6, Calvary celebrated its patronal feast--that of the Most Holy Rosary--with rousing celebrations. Far too noisy, Perros complained, as the din of Chinese bells and gongs permeated the neighborhood, although he was grateful for the enthusiasm of his parishioners. On October 23 the three young women who had entered as oblates the preceding year, received their veils and made promises for one year. A week later two of them (Martha and Jean Berchmans) were sent to help at *Regina Coeli* while Majella remained to assist Agnès at Calvary.

The following month, *Mater Dei* celebrated the patronal feast of Bishop Perros on November 9. Following a meeting with the community, he was brought to the school where flowers, addresses and songs in Thai, French and English were performed in his honor. Gemma who had worked tirelessly to present a program representative of *Mater Dei* was rewarded by high praise from Perros who in his speech to the children commented: "You are the children of *Mater Dei*, the best school in the capital." Then in the spirit of the new Siamese nationalism he added diplomatically: "You are Siamese; keep your dress, your customs, don't imitate European modes."

No sooner had the community recovered from this celebration, than all their energy was engaged on the festivities to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of the Ursuline Order. Since the chapel of *Mater Dei* was not large enough, an altar was erected on the lawn and on the morning of November 25 pupils of both schools, numbering some 350, gathered at the Pontifical High Mass which, as the annalist noted proudly, was sung in perfect Gregorian by a student choir prepared by the indefatigable Gemma Feeney. That afternoon the surrounding grounds were filled with the cars of dignitaries--ministers representing France, Belgium, Portugal, the United States--who came to attend a Solemn Benediction, again presided over by Bishop Perros. Refreshments were served following the ceremony and, the annalist noted with weary satisfaction, all left by 7:00pm.

It had been an arduous year full of the unexpected: they had lost Bernard to China, Raphael had left Bangkok for Chieng Mai, Marie de Lourdes had been appointed superior at *Mater Dei*. Four new missionaries had joined them. They had the joy of a perpetual profession and an episcopal jubilee. They were still perilously in debt despite the fact that their schools were flourishing. They had few converts but growing numbers of devoted pupils and alumnae. They had been harassed by ill health but they had persevered. They might well claim St. Paul's words as their own: "Seeing then that we have been entrusted with this commission, which we owe entirely to God's mercy, we never lose heart....Such transcendent power does not come from us, but comes from God alone."

CHAPTER TEN

"TO LIVE THE SUSCIPE"

The most profound--if not the most dramatic--event for the Ursulines in 1936 was their participation in a thirty-day retreat held at *Mater Dei* for the sisters of both communities. Such a retreat would ordinarily be part of the Tertianship--or Third Probation, as it was called--to be made in Rome at the end of ten years of profession. But Rome was far away and the possibility of all the sisters in Siam being freed for such an experience seemed unlikely. Marie de Lourdes, however, having experienced the rich graces of the tertianship the preceding year and convinced of the importance of the long retreat, had after months of effort finally succeeded in finding an available retreat director.

Since the thirty-day retreat was a component of the Ignatian Exercises, the director had to be a Jesuit; in addition, he had to be fluent in French since this was considered the language of the mission. Finally, Father Vandebussche, from the Jesuit mission in Ceylon, agreed to come to Siam for two months--from mid-April to mid-June. Forty-five days of this period were spent preaching not only to the Ursulines but to the recently established Carmelites and to the Brothers of St. Gabriel as well. "His apostolic zeal and physical endurance are certainly to be praised," Bishop Perros noted in his monthly report.

The Ursulines were equally high in their praise. Mary Sheehan, writing to Barbara Klaholt, Provincial of the Central Province, USA, avowed that this month was one of the most important and happy of her life. Although all the conferences were in French, Father Vandebussche spoke a little English which made confessions and personal encounters much easier for the Americans. The retreat ended on April 18 with the traditional recitation of the "Suscipe," that Ignatian prayer which offers everything to God in a spirit of total abandonment. The following day the sisters from Chieng Mai took the morning train home, "to live the Suscipe," as they put it. It was an act of abandon which they were to be called on to repeat often in the next months for 1936 was a year which was to test them all.

The months following the Long Retreat began well with an influx of new members. On June 6 Sister Joseph Douville arrived from China. Of Canadian birth, she had come to Swatow as a postulant in 1923, making her temporary vows in 1925 and her perpetual vows three years later. Except for a period of study in St. Saulve, in the north of France, she had served on the China mission for thirteen years. Experienced in mission hardship and fluent in Swatowese, she was welcomed by the Bangkok community with open arms. Just a month later they welcomed another member, this time a former pupil of *Mater Dei*. Marguerite Tan had left Bangkok for Beaugency to begin her novitiate in 1934. Two years later, as Angèle de Notre-Dame, she made her temporary vows in Beaugency in April and almost at once began the voyage home to *Mater Dei*. This was their second native vocation and the community rejoiced in the sign that their mission was catching fire.

Earlier that year, two former members of the mission who had been serving in China had also returned, but under less felicitous circumstances. Maria Luisa Geminati who had been in China since 1931 had now, at her own request, returned to Bangkok. But even in the familiar atmosphere of *Mater Dei* she was not happy and, as Marie de Lourdes noted in a letter to Rome, never ceased requesting a return to Italy. She had been on the missions for nine years--a long period for someone who from the beginning had found it a lonely and disappointing experience. A few months after her return to

Bangkok, her repeated request was granted and she returned to her native land.

The second arrival from China was Lorenzina Bellotti who had originally arrived in Bangkok with Maria Luisa in 1927 and had been in China since 1928. Of an erratic and emotional temperament, she had been further unbalanced by the climate, the isolation, the strangeness of the Far Eastern Missions. Never at home in any of the three Chinese missions, she was by turn angry, ungovernable or depressed. She had little facility in languages and lacked the ability to make herself understood. Needless to say, her presence taxed the endurance of the small struggling communities. By June of 1935 Lorenzina had reached a point of crisis. She began to hallucinate: hearing voices, fearing that people were trying to poison her. It had become an unendurable situation, both for Lorenzina and for the small, overburdened community. Taxed to their limit by the turbulence and unrest in the country, never certain of sufficient income to keep the mission going, the presence of Lorenzina with her fierce bouts of anger and terror were beyond their ability to cope with. Marie du Rosaire, then the superior, wrote in desperation to Marie de Lourdes in Bangkok, begging for help. The answer was slow in coming and despite the danger of the situation (Rosaire feared the eruption of physical violence), it was not until a year later that permission was granted for Lorenzina to return to Bangkok. Here she remained for another year until arrangements were finally made for her to return to Italy in April 1937.

In July 1936 Marie de Lourdes Simons' term as superior of the Missions was coming to an end. It had been a difficult situation for *Mater Dei*, for Marie de Lourdes' double responsibility had taken her away from the community at a time when they needed the counsel and strength of a competent prioress. In addition to Marie de Lourdes' frequent absences, Agnès Delattre, who as assistant superior had carried the burden of daily responsibility, had been hospitalized for several months with typhoid. As soon as she was well enough she had been sent to Chieng Mai for a period of recuperation. Thus the *Mater Dei* community often found itself without

sufficient leadership--a void which dominant personalities like Gemma Feeney and Xavier Pirc were all too quick to fill.

Although it would have seemed more prudent to appoint another religious to assume the role of superior at *Mater Dei*, in fact, that July word was received from Rome reaffirming Marie de Lourdes' double leadership. What the community did not yet know--and what was to complicate the situation even further--was that she was soon to be taken even farther away from them. As early as April she had written to her parents:

Very Reverend Mother [St. Jean] has called me to Rome [to assist with the English Probation]. Before going I have to visit China and Java and then meet her in France.... I have no idea when I shall be back on the Missions again. My stay in Rome 'may be for months and may be for years.'

She was well aware of the problems her absence would cause and on May 5 wrote to St. Jean that she was doing her best to organize matters as well as she could before her departure. Although acknowledging the difficulties of leaving *Mater Dei* without a superior, she wrote in conclusion, "no one here is available." Perhaps, she suggested in the same letter, Bernard Mancel might be asked to come from China for a few months: "She will keep things in order," she affirmed, well aware of Bernard's decisive mode of government and her ability to deal with dominant personalities. There is no way to know if this suggestion was ever made to Bernard, but in any case it was never implemented. Toward the end of June the question of a superior for *Mater Dei* was again the subject of discussion. This time Marie de Lourdes recommended Gemma Feeney, an appointment which she acknowledged would "be a surprise" to the community, but, she concluded, she could offer no other possibility.

It was undoubtedly this question of personnel--a question which was equally a problem in China--which led Marie de Lourdes to think of a total reorganization of both the missions of Siam and China. In the same letter in which she recommended Gemma as superior at *Mater Dei*, she wrote,

"The other day the thought came to me: wouldn't it be much simpler for our two houses in Siam to be joined to Java where there is a noviciate, a juniorate, etc. It would also make it easier for the transfer of subjects."

She also acknowledged that she and Raphael had discussed the possibility of relinquishing the China mission to another congregation, since it seemed impossible to provide sufficient sisters to keep both missions functioning successfully. Ironically, at almost the same date, Bernard Mancel was writing to St. Jean suggesting that the Ursulines might relinquish the Siam mission, thus providing additional personnel and financial support for the struggling Chinese communities! It was a remarkable suggestion coming from Bernard who for nine years had devoted herself body and soul to the mission in Siam. To those in Rome who might be shocked by her suggestion, she pointed out simply that while she still loved Siam, the little mission of China was now her first care.

Despite all these anxieties, however, the two schools at Bangkok and Chiang Mai were doing well. That summer *Mater Dei* registered three hundred pupils--a goal they had been working toward for some time. On July 30 the bishop celebrated a mass of thanksgiving with high praise for the accomplishments of the Ursulines who, he observed, "offer an education which is not only progressive but which provides above all a total Christian environment for their pupils."

For a while that summer *Regina Coeli* had been less fortunate, experiencing a difficult time with one of the deputies who had launched a propaganda campaign against them--mostly on religious grounds, as Raphael pointed out. For a time some of their pupils, influenced by the misleading reports, left them to attend the government schools. By July, however, the tide had turned and they registered 153 pupils with a substantial increase in the number of boarders. That month in his report, Perros wrote optimistically:

Boys and girls continue to attend the schools run by the Brothers of St. Gabriel, the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres and the Ursulines of the Roman Union. The parents, if not

the children, recognize not only the value of our instruction but above all the value of a Catholic education.

In the last week of July, however, the joy of their success was tempered by the serious illness of Bernadette Farget. Bernadette had been a mainstay of the school since its founding in 1932. Tireless and resourceful, it was hard to imagine the school without her. For some time she had noticed a swelling in her breast and when, finally, it did not respond to such domestic remedies as hot compresses, she went to the McCormick Hospital, run by the Presbyterians of the American Mission. The immediate diagnosis was cancer. On the last day of July she left for Bangkok where the Hospital St. Louis had more sophisticated resources than those available in Chiang Mai. On August 4 Bernadette was operated on. Although the doctor was pleased with her recovery, yet, as Raphael pointed out, she faced "an uncertain future" while they waited for the prognosis of the specimen which had to be sent to Paris for a complete diagnosis. Although they were mercifully spared the foreknowledge, Bernadette's sudden sickness signaled a period of dramatic illness for *Regina Coeli* which came close to forcing them to close the community.

On September 1, a month after her surgery, Bernadette was well enough to leave the hospital and begin her convalescence at *Mater Dei*. It was a community suffering from a profound sense of loss for they had just learned that Marie de Lourdes was leaving them for an indefinite period of time. She had finally announced to the community what she had known for almost six months. Following her visitation in Java and Harbin, she would not return to Bangkok, as they had expected, but would continue on to Rome where she would spend the remainder of the year. In her absence, Gemma Feeney would be acting superior. It was not only a surprise but a painful deprivation, for Marie de Lourdes was both a competent administrator and a sensitive spiritual counselor--an invaluable gift in the spiritual isolation of the mission. Even students recognized her qualities and protested at her departure, as one of them wrote: "She is kind and gentle and is the light of us all. I am afraid that some of the girls are going

to leave the school if she does not come back.... We are grieving bitterly and miss her very much."

On September 8, amid tearful farewells--reminiscent of those they had shed for Bernard just a year before--Marie de Lourdes took ship for Java. A month later she arrived at Swatow and together with Bernard Mancel started the long series of boat and train trips which would bring them to the Ursuline community situated in Harbin in the rugged northwest of China. First a boat to Shanghai, wrote Marie de Lourdes, then a Japanese liner to the coast city of Dairen, and finally "an ultra modern Japanese train" which brought them to Harbin.

Her letters about conditions in Harbin as well as about the world scene were naively optimistic. "They expect the [Russian] revolution to be over in five years. Some [of the Russian exiles] are already returning [home]," she wrote to her parents. As for the Japanese control of Manchukuo--as it was now called--she saw it as a positive bulwark against the threat of Chinese communism. She admired, too, the discipline and order the Japanese had imposed. Contrasting the dirt and disorder she had found in China, she noted, "[The Japanese] are certainly a clever people. Wherever they are, order reigns." She can hardly be faulted for her shortsighted view, for it was shared by many far more sophisticated than she.

The work of the sisters in Harbin had immense appeal for her and she hoped to prolong her stay, but on November 26 she received a telegram from Bangkok: "Raphael seriously ill. Pray." Raphael had been in ill health for months and on October 7 she had written to St. Jean Martin that the regime she had been following for one condition seemed to have caused stones in her kidneys. The doctor feared that she must soon have surgery. Her condition quickly deteriorated and less than a week later she took the train for Bangkok and the Hospital St. Louis, leaving Agnès Delattre acting superior in her absence.

It was a terrible blow for *Regina Coeli*. Agnès, by temperament steady and capable, had hardly recovered her own health. Bernadette was still

recuperating at *Mater Dei*. Mary Sheehan had been advised to have surgery for an inflamed appendix. Stanislas Bosnák was struggling with a recurrent case of tuberculosis. With a faith tested to the breaking point, the remnant of the community set about the well-nigh impossible task of keeping the school functioning.

On October 24 Raphael had surgery not for kidney stones, as originally diagnosed, but for gallstones. While the surgery was serious it was not considered dangerous, but Raphael's heart responded adversely to the anesthesia and for a while it seemed that she would not live. All night and into the next day the doctor and Gemma Feeney were at her bedside until, finally, her heart began to resume its normal rhythm and Gemma sent a second telegram to Harbin with the consoling news that Raphael--although still seriously ill--was out of immediate danger.

Raphael's illness necessitated a change in Marie de Lourdes' itinerary. She now decided that upon her return to Swatow she would not sail immediately for Europe as she had planned but instead return to Bangkok. Here she arrived on the evening of December 3 joyfully welcomed by those who just two months before had said their long farewells! Her weeks away in which she had observed first-hand the substantial and well-ordered houses of Java in dramatic contrast with the poor, understaffed missions of China had confirmed her conviction that China and Siam were attempting more than was prudent or practical. The increasing problems of sickness in Siam made her earlier suggestion of affiliating Siam with Java or even suppressing the China mission altogether a more immediate option.

During the week she had spent in Swatow, she had discussed these difficulties with Bishop Vogel who had recently replaced Bishop Rayssac in the Swatow Vicariate. The conversation, which she later reported in detail to St. Jean, was ambiguous. To her surprise, Vogel did not at first oppose her suggestion of replacing the Ursulines with another congregation. He seemed less interested in maintaining schools than in obtaining a congregation whose primary work would be to minister to the sick and the poor and occupy itself with parish duties. In addition, he

asserted, "I would prefer a congregation which already has a house in China and which could form a congregation of native sisters since we are preparing to hand over the Vicariate to a native clergy." When Marie de Lourdes pointed out that the Ursulines were already engaged in the formation of just such a group--the Chinese Virgins--with its novitiate in Hopo, he shook his head. "This is not a congregation," he declared; "the priests are asking who are these young girls who are going about with veils on their heads. They have no Constitutions." None of Marie de Lourdes' explanations seemed to satisfy him and their conversation ended inconclusively.

A few days later, however, when Marie de Lourdes went to bid him goodbye, Vogel's tone had changed and he seemed eager to keep the Ursulines in Swatow. "Let us pray that everything will turn out for the greatest glory of God. China is the most important country in the Far East, and it is the most important of your missions." He would, he concluded, write to St. Jean Martin on this subject. How much of these plans she confided to any of the sisters in Siam or China is impossible to know, but when on December 8, Marie de Lourdes left Bangkok, traveling by train south through Malaysia to Penang where she took ship for Europe, nothing in either of the missions had dramatically changed.

The sisters themselves must have wondered how long they could continue. That December, 1936, *Mater Dei* lost two members who were transferred to the China mission: François Rooyakkers who had arrived from Holland just three years earlier; and Annunciata Wögerer who had arrived from her tertianship eighteen months before. At *Regina Coeli* their stint of ill-health continued unabated. Stanislas Bosnàk continued to run a debilitating fever and the doctors were recommending that she return to Europe where the climate might enable her to recover from her tuberculosis. Theophane Westerman, despite the healthier climate of Chieng Mai, continued in an undiagnosed state of weakness and fever. Bernadette Farget had returned but was still recuperating from her surgery. And by mid-December it had become clear that Mary Sheehan, their diligent headmistress, could no longer postpone an operation for the removal of her appendix.

On December 26 she entered McCormick Hospital where Dr. Collier prepared her for surgery. The decision had been made to use a local anaesthetic. Although there is no explanation for such a decision, perhaps it was influenced by the almost-fatal experience of Raphael whose heart had reacted badly to a general anaesthetic. What had seemed like a simple procedure, however, was soon indicated to be far more complex. The operation revealed Mary's appendix to be in normal condition; the real source of the difficulty was two tumors on her large intestine. They were badly diseased and although Mary was only under a local anaesthetic, there was no question that they must be removed at once. The procedure was further complicated by the condition of Mary's blood which lacked a coagulating factor as well as by the fact that she had been given only sufficient anaesthetic to last for an hour.

The surgery lasted for sixty-five minutes and it was an hour and a half before Mary could be wheeled to her room. As one of the nuns later commented, it was clear from the doctor's face that her condition was very grave. During the following night she suffered a massive hemorrhage which required blood transfusions. Several of the nuns were tested and Jeanne Terrace--a Belgian sister who had been in Siam since 1927--was found to have the same blood type and thus became the donor. Mary rallied after the transfusion and by December 29--three days after the operation--she had regained a little strength and was able to retain some simple food. The doctor seemed pleased and assured the nuns that if she continued thus, they had every reason to hope for her recovery. By the fifth day Mary was much better. The hemorrhaging had been controlled and although she was still very weak she was quite conscious and lucid.

On January 1, however, an apparently unrelated symptom appeared. "Sister Mary is suffering from swollen salivary glands," the convent annalist noted, "which makes the feeding difficult." By the following day the swelling which had originated in her upper right jaw had spread until the whole right side of her face was badly distended. The pain was exquisite, extending into her head so that she tossed in agony. The doctors attempted to alleviate her condition by lancing the abscess in her jaw, but all their

efforts were to no avail. The swelling was now massive and all efforts to reduce her temperature unsuccessful.

The next five days was a period of unabated suffering. She remained conscious throughout and on January 5, although her condition was clearly deteriorating, she rallied enough to dictate a letter to her brother Leo. Her family had sent her letters and gifts for Christmas and she insisted that she must write to them.

Dearest Leo,

Here I am at McCormick Hospital after having my appendix and a couple growths removed. That part went just fine but I developed a swollen gland which is keeping me in bed a little bit longer. I received Lucille's letter telling about the children. Now if you want to tell Mother, you may, because you know her nervous condition better than I do. This hospital is a Presbyterian institution but everybody has been simply lovely. I could not ask for better care. I will write you more later when I have more strength.

Then with one final effort she dictated a second short note to her mother:

Dearest Mother,

I received the fruit cake. Arrived O.K. It is delicious. Thank you for it and for the candy also. I will write you more later when school gets in running order.

Then in her own handwriting: "Your loving baby girl, Mary, osu"

On the morning of January 6 the abscess broke and the infection reached the brain. Despite alcohol rubs her fever was uncontrollable and the doctor feared convulsion. That afternoon she received the Last Sacraments. The nuns hoped vainly that this would help her rally but by evening she began

to sink rapidly. It was clear that she could not last through another night. She had slipped into unconsciousness and no longer responded to the prayers of the sisters who surrounded her bed. She died just before midnight on January 6, Feast of the Epiphany, day of God's radiant theophany. After the long struggle she had been delivered from darkness and God's resplendent light had shone upon her, as the prophet Isaiah had proclaimed:

Arise Jerusalem

Arise clothed in light

Your light has come

and the glory of the Lord shines over you.

For though darkness covers the earth

And dark night the nations,

The Lord shall shine upon you

And over you shall his glory appear.

When it had become clear that she would not recover, a telegram had been sent to Bangkok: "Abscess on brain. No hope." At once Raphael, accompanied by Clotilde Angela, took the train for Chieng Mai--but it was already too late. When they arrived at the station, Agnès and Bernadette were there to meet them with the news that Mary had died the night before. They went at once to the convent where Mary was being waked.

Clotilde Angela in a letter to Mrs. Sheehan described the final parting:

Mother Mary lay in the little Chapel--almost smiling. She was thin and white like wax, but the lips, parted enough to show the teeth, gave her a look of sweet peace which they say has been growing since she died and has replaced the suffering expression she then had.

Many friends and pupils were kneeling there; the children of [Sacred Heart School] prayed aloud. The altar was draped in black, six candles burned. Around the casket were beautiful wreaths sent by the doctors and other friends. An hour later, when the others were gone, we gathered around, took a last long look at our dear Mother Mary, Spouse of Christ, with her wreath of white roses, her vows, and her ring--for it would not come off her finger. Then we stretched the mortuary sheet over her and closed the coffin. We said the *De Profundis* but followed it by the *Magnificat*. She is the first of us to have the joy of dying on the Mission.

The funeral was beautiful--everything dignified, silent, sweet. All the children marched in procession headed by the school flag, draped in Black. The Church was crowded with Europeans and Americans and, of course, Siamese. The High Mass was well chanted. In the graveyard the sun came through the trees making everything bright instead of somber. Reverend Mother [Raphael] was the first to sprinkle the holy water and throw the earth over our dear Mother Mary.

That month Bishop Perros noted in his report: "The first religious of the Ursulines of the Roman Union has just died at Chieng Mai. Mother Mary Joseph of the Sacred Heart, American by birth, is dead at the age of thirty-five, having spent just five years in Siam."

Although the nuns, like Mary herself, had nothing but praise for the care she had received in the hospital, yet there must have been a sense of bewilderment that such an apparently simple operation could have cost Mary her life. From the beginning the diagnosis had been erroneous and so, consequently, the surgery had not been adequately prepared. A local anaesthetic would certainly not have been administered had Mary's actual condition been recognized. The quality of Mary's blood had contributed, of

course, to the difficulty. Most mysterious of all was the proximate cause of her death. What had caused the abscess in her jaw which ultimately invaded her brain? They were questions for which they found no answer. Dr. Collier, however, in an effort to provide some solace to her family back in Illinois wrote at length to her brother, describing the nature of the tumors, her response to surgery, etc. In a paragraph dealing with the relation of her death to the operation, he also commented forthrightly on what he considered an imprudent style of living. While he acknowledged the good the sisters were accomplishing and admired their devoted spirit, he could not concur with what seemed to him a destructive pattern of living:

It is a little difficult to judge the part that the operation had in her death. The operation was urgently needed, and probably without it she would have had a fatal rupture of the diverticulum. She had gone to a dentist in Bangkok in regard to that tooth. She had had several teeth removed here--I took out two or three myself. However there was nothing apparently wrong with the tooth before the operation and no reason to pull it. My own feeling is that if she had been in better physical condition she could have easily recovered from the operation and the tooth abscess both--probably the tooth abscess would not have developed.

The life which these Catholic sisters lead here is a very strenuous one--long hours, far too long for the tropics--limited food, heavy burdens of responsibility. A recently published study of missionary health problems, including the health records of such organizations as the American Consular service, Standard Oil, etc., show that the Catholic church has 44 deaths per 1000 as against 4 by the Protestant missionary bodies and three plus for the commercial organizations. I think that without a doubt the primary cause of Mother Mary's death lies in her strenuous life in the tropics with insufficient rest and inadequate food, and I

might add, lack of furlough or change to a temperate climate.

It was a heavy indictment and very close to the truth but as the Ursulines faced another year they could see no alleviation except to sacrifice one of their schools--a project which they apparently considered unthinkable.

They were unaware that Marie de Lourdes, now on her way to Rome, had already given serious concern to a major reorganization of the mission.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE"

Marie de Lourdes' visitation of the Far Eastern missions in the fall of 1936 had done nothing to alleviate her anxieties. Only Java, with its eighty years of experience behind it, was stable and healthy. China, although free of debt, lacked the personnel to staff their three missions and was, as well, caught in the increasing turmoil of political events. Harbin, too, although engaged in a courageous apostolate, was facing an uncertain and dangerous future. Although convinced of the value of the work the nuns were doing with the Russian emigrés, Marie de Lourdes had been sufficiently concerned about their situation to stop in Shanghai to confer with the bishop there about the advisability of closing the Harbin mission. Their conversation, however, had been inconclusive as had her talks with Bishop Vogel about the future of the Swatow mission.

It was Siam, the mission dearest to her heart, which was causing her the most disquiet. Bernard Mancel in her passion to extend the kingdom of God and with her extravagant faith in God's Providence had plunged the two houses of Siam into cataclysmic debt. As in China, the number of sisters was hopelessly inadequate for the work of the schools. Climate, overwork, and the lack of nutritious food--as Dr. Collier noted in his letter to Sister Mary Sheehan's brother--was leading to serious problems of health.

When her recommendation to close the China mission and thus strengthen Siam had not won Bishop Vogel's unqualified approval, Marie de Lourdes returned to a plan she had suggested to St. Jean Martin the previous year: to affiliate both China and Siam with the flourishing mission of Java. She had discussed this favorably with her two counselors (probably Raphael and Gemma), but, much to her surprise, when the plan was broached to the vice-provincial of Java, she was faced with resistance. With her usual determination, however, she held firm, brushing aside any objections and arguing that the practical considerations were of minor importance. "It seems to me that Mother Provincial sees more difficulties than there are," she wrote to St. Jean in Rome.

The question of language and nationality seemed to her inconsequential. Almost everyone in authority spoke French, she asserted, and, at any rate, it was more important to be concerned about union than about nationality. Yes, she agreed, such an affiliation would necessarily increase the responsibility of the vice-provincial but certainly it would not "bind her head to foot," as the letter from Java expressed it. The essential was that the more recent missions have the opportunity of benefitting from Java's years of experience. And, of course—although the thought went unexpressed—to profit materially from their abundant resources. Although Marie de Lourdes' arguments were cogent, they were not sufficient to receive immediate acceptance either in Rome or Java. The affiliation with Java would wait for some time.

The Siam missions, however, were clearly in jeopardy and in April of that year St. Jean Martin made an appointment for Marie de Lourdes (who had arrived in Rome in February) to see Cardinal Fumasoni-Biondi, Prefect of the Congregation of Propaganda, in the hope of receiving some financial assistance for Siam. The meeting, far from offering a remedy, was both hostile and humiliating.

The following week Marie de Lourdes wrote a full and graphic account of her unsuccessful encounter to Bishop Vogel in Swatow. No sooner had she finished her explanation of their debts, she wrote, than His Eminence cut

her short: "Let me give you some advice; never begin a school with debt." She could not but agree but then pressed him further: "You're right, Your Eminence, but now that it's done what can we do to extricate ourselves?" The answer was brusque and uncompromising: "Get rid of it. You've made mistakes and now you want us to rectify them!" His manner was irascible and when in reply to his question, she told him the amount of the debt, "He raised his eyes and threw up his hands. 'That's enormous! It would be better to close the house.'" But, she pointed out, it was precisely their debt which made it impossible for them to sell the institution to any other congregation.

The interview ended as it had begun except for a meager hope that, at the recommendation of the Bishop of Siam, the Propaganda might arrange to send them a small sum each year to diminish their debts.

Thus another door had been closed and at the very time when the country of Siam itself was facing difficult days. In February of 1937 a serious epidemic of cholera had broken out, spreading from Bangkok into other parts of the country. Within a few weeks 146 deaths had been recorded, thirty-five of which were in Bangkok. The Public Health Authority did all it could to improve sanitation and warn people of the measures they should take to avoid contagion, but in the poorer sections of the city and in the country districts where sanitation still remained primitive, the epidemic was hard to control.

The state of the economy was not helped by an unusually dry summer. Even August, ordinarily a month of heavy rain, provided no alleviation. Helplessly they watched the crops wither and as Bishop Perros noted, "the farmers, already impoverished, are anticipating a painful future." In his effort to invoke heavenly aid, he ordered the prescribed prayer for rain--"*ad petendam pluviam*"--to be said at the end of every Mass.

The economy was always a matter of concern for the government, which although stable still had its critics and agitators. In February a special session of the Representatives of the People was opened at Bangkok to deal

with some of the country's important questions. "The needs of the country," Perros wrote in his report, "both in the sphere of agriculture or in education are immense and the budget...is insufficient for any big projects." He was, however, quick to give credit to this small independent country in its struggle to modernize. "Be that as it may," he continued, "Siam and its Ministers of Finance, in spite of everything, deserve our congratulations, for it is one of the rare countries in the world...which has a healthy currency...and a budget--which although meager--is almost perfectly balanced."

Despite its lack of funds, Siam had made two important advances in the field of communication. Some months earlier, Bangkok had opened the country's first airport, Don Muang, some twenty-two kilometers outside the city. Planes were now coming from England, France, and Holland twice each week. The proud boast was that one could put a letter in the post at Bangkok on Thursday morning and have it delivered at Paris the following Monday afternoon! Some months later short wave radio was introduced, bringing in news and European music on Monday and Thursday between 1:00p.m. and 3:00p.m.

Few of these advances affected the Ursulines, however; their daily lives and their anxiety for the future were their major concerns. In February 1937 they said goodbye to Raphael Vurnik who was sailing for Java in an effort to regain her health. Although following the death of Mary Sheehan, she had remained in Chieng Mai, attempting to fulfill her role as superior, it was soon clear that her health would not permit her to continue. In April another loss was confirmed: they learned that Marie de Lourdes Simons had been appointed General Mission Procurator at Rome, thus ending any possibility of a return to Siam. At *Mater Dei* Gemma Feeney continued as acting superior as they awaited word of a new prioress. By Easter of that year major changes were announced from Rome: Marie de St. Ignace Six would return from China to be superior; Gemma Feeney would go to Chieng Mai to take Mary Sheehan's position as mistress general at *Regina Coeli*. At *Mater Dei* Rita Buttell, who had arrived from the Harbin mission

the year before, would be mistress general with Xavier Pirc as mistress of studies.

The choice of a prioress for *Mater Dei* had not been easy. In a letter to St. Jean Martin some months earlier, Marie de Lourdes had suggested either Bernadette Farget or Marie de St. Ignace Six. The former, however, was desperately needed at *Regina Coeli* and she hesitated to change her. Marie de St. Ignace had been in China since 1934 and during that time had been an invaluable help to Bernard Mancel. Although she had had some initial difficulty in making the adjustment to the East when she had first arrived in Bangkok in December 1932, the life in China, while arduous, had seemed to agree with her. Marie de Lourdes was impressed by her intelligence, her deep religious spirit, her generosity. While some felt that her health would not withstand the added responsibility and more difficult climate of Siam, her appointment was made that spring and on May 3 she arrived in Bangkok and was immediately installed as prioress.

It was not an easy time to assume the leadership of the community. It was almost two years since they had had a "full-time" superior. Marie de Lourdes, although officially fulfilling that role, had been constantly traveling in the East and in Europe. Gemma Feeney in her title as "acting superior" had never psychologically assumed the position of prioress. She was essentially a school person who recognized that she was only "filling in" while they awaited a canonical appointment. *Mater Dei* was a devoted and industrious community but its members had tended to discover their individual modes of survival. It would require careful direction to draw them back to a common center.

In many ways Marie de St. Ignace was a perfect choice. She was what many would call a "model" religious--careful and meticulous in religious observance, convinced of the importance of unity in community living. In China she had worked successfully under the dominant personality of Bernard Mancel. In Siam she found herself alone and in many ways an outsider. She did not know the Siamese language; she had no experience in the complex organization of the school nor did she have the background to

deal with the burden of debt which always threatened. There were, undoubtedly, those, grown accustomed to making their own decisions, who found her too exacting. Heat and overwork often led to short tempers and it did not help that St. Ignace arrived at the very hottest time of the Siamese summer.

Most difficult of all, there was no one whose counsel she could ask. Siam was still dependent on France and would, therefore, in the normal order receive advice and permissions from the French provincial. But Chrysostôme Oudin was only too quick to recognize that she had little understanding of the Siamese school system or of government requirements. "Do what you think best," was her answer to most dilemmas. It was hardly a helpful reply to the beleaguered St. Ignace. With no other guidance available, it was to Marie de Lourdes that she turned for help, writing at length about the difficulties she was experiencing. But even this help was far from adequate in the problems she faced; Rome was far away and the mail slow and uncertain.

By the fall of 1937--after just four months in Bangkok--the climate, the burden of responsibility, and difficulties within the community had taken their toll. That September St. Jean Ruegg wrote in anxiety to St. Jean Martin explaining her concern for the health of the superior. "Some in the community are so exigent," she complained, showing little consideration for St. Ignace's depleted energies. Although Agnès Delattre had returned from Chiang Mai to be assistant, her health had been permanently weakened, St. Jean observed, making it impossible for her to assume the material burdens of the house. They heard only infrequently from the provincial of France and even those letters were of little practical help. "We sometimes feel abandoned," she concluded, no doubt expressing St. Ignace's feelings as well as her own. In a letter to Marie de Lourdes, she was even more outspoken: "You know *Mater Dei*, Reverend Mother, so I am not telling you anything new when I say there are some very difficult characters here."

In October St. Ignace's headaches and sleeplessness had reached dramatic proportion and the doctor prescribed complete rest. At the end of the month she traveled to Klong Toi, a little country town not far from Bangkok, where a congregation of sisters had a convent and a novitiate. Here, it was hoped, the fresh country air, the freedom from responsibility, and medication to control her headaches and induce sleep would return her to health. Often in the late afternoon sisters from *Mater Dei* would come to visit her and accompany her on a walk. This fleeting companionship provided St. Ignace with the only break in her solitude. Except for a prescribed walk for an hour a day, there was little to occupy her. While she was too exhausted to engage in much activity, yet the complete isolation must have only heightened her sense of abandonment.

By mid-November it was clear that the simple rest at Klong Toi was not enough to return her to health. As with other cases of ill health, Java was recommended as a restorative atmosphere and at the end of the month St. Ignace returned to Bangkok. She stayed only a single day at *Mater Dei*, just long enough to pack her possessions and prepare for the sea voyage to Java. Shocked and saddened by their unexpected loss, the community found itself once again--after a period of only six months--governed by a superior "in absentia."

Regina Coeli was faring somewhat better, for after four months of rest and medical care in Java, Raphael Vurnik had returned to Siam the preceding June. She had brought with her a young Chinese sister, recently professed at Beaugency, Charles Lee, who was to spend her three years of temporary vows at *Mater Dei*. Raphael wasted no time in Bangkok but left for Chiang Mai immediately to take up, once more, her duties as superior.

Her four months' absence had not appreciably changed the situation at *Regina Coeli* which continued to be plagued with ill health. Theophane suffered from a persistent fever which sapped her energy. Stanislas Bosnák—Dr. Collier continued to insist—would never recover from her recurrent bouts of tuberculosis if she remained in the debilitating climate of Siam. Teresita Lightwood was far from well, although the cause had not

been determined. Now, in addition, there was some fear that Bernadette Farget's cancer might have spread to the other breast.

Mary Sheehan's death had been a tragic loss in every way. She had been competent and accepted by both teachers and parents. With the arrival of Gemma Feeney as mistress general, the atmosphere of the school changed appreciably. Although equally well prepared professionally, she tended to be peremptory and abrupt in her demands--qualities that the Thai found difficult to respond to. Gentle and compliant by nature, they were unprepared for Gemma's forceful manner.

It was their financial situation, however, which gave Raphael the greatest cause for anxiety. Because there were so few religious who met the government's educational standards, they were forced to hire increasing numbers of Thai teachers. For the most part they were inadequately trained and their preparation imposed additional work on the mistress general whose responsibility it was to keep up the standard of the school; but even more crucial was the fact that the teachers' salaries--small though they were--sapped the nuns' meager resources.

Early in the winter of 1938 Raphael wrote at length to St. Jean Martin. Humanly speaking, she averred, she knew no solution to their plight. She had, of course, been in touch with the bishop about providing some help for them but his reply was simply to keep up their trust in God! Finally, however, he had given them a small sum that had enabled them to meet the payments on their interest. On December 17, St. Jean Martin wrote to Perros thanking him for his generosity but stating bleakly the situation of the mission: "It is a great sorrow, your Excellency, to admit that we are not sufficient for this work. At the time of the foundation [of *Regina Coeli*] it was said that *Mater Dei* would be able to sustain it, but it seems that this is still impossible."

For those priests in charge of evangelization in the north, the thought of losing such a valuable institution as *Regina Coeli* was devastating. Father

Chorin, who had championed the Ursulines in their first difficult days in Bangkok, now wrote pleadingly to Marie de Lourdes:

It is a heavy burden for you to sustain and I hope you can lighten it as soon as possible. Your dream of closing Chieng Mai would be a grave mistake, for who would buy your land and your houses?....As I have said often, Mother Bernard went too fast or thought too grand. The fault--if there is a fault--may lead to a painful future; but I don't think it's necessary to close the house, still less Bangkok where it seems you are flourishing.

Father Chorin, it seemed, had forgotten that he had been one of the strongest voices encouraging Bernard to undertake the mission at Chieng Mai and the loudest in his praise of the expedition with which she had set about the foundation.

At the beginning of 1938, the Ursuline mission in Siam was in a more precarious state than at any time since the first difficult days of 1925. It was more than a question of money. The insufficient number of religious, the constant problems of health, the exigent demands of the Department of Education, the lack of valid leadership—all had led to what some considered a deterioration in religious spirit. Raphael, after a visit to *Mater Dei*, wrote to St. Jean Martin commenting that the absence of a superior "has been keenly felt" and noting that when there is no legitimate leadership, "then dominant characters take over."

Anxiety was taking its toll on all sides and the letter that Bishop Perros wrote to St. Jean Martin in January of 1938 manifested an unusually bleak and disconsolate tone. After a long summary of all the nuns have suffered physically, of the difficulties imposed by the government, and the lack of financial help from the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda, he launched into his personal dissatisfaction with the present state of the Ursuline houses. Although he acknowledged that many of their problems were beyond their control, he pointed out that there were some things that he felt

St. Jean was in a position to improve. The most important of these was to establish a stable personnel.

The nostalgic tone of the letter may be accounted for in part as a tendency of the elderly to glorify the days of their youth. Perros had come to Siam in 1894, at the age of twenty-four. He was now sixty-eight years old, burdened by his labors and the weight of unbroken responsibility. In the forty-four years since he had come to Siam, the world had changed. Siam had grown more complex, more materialistic, more sophisticated. He had watched an absolute monarchy shift to a more democratic government with the bureaucratic machinery of councils, committees, and legislatures. With the growth of Siamese nationalism, Westerners found themselves constrained by sometimes arbitrary regulations.

Looking back, Perros recalled the earlier years as simple and uncluttered, endowing them with the rosy light of memory. "The beginnings of the Ursuline mission thirteen years ago were wonderful," he exclaimed, forgetting those first months when the superior lay dying of typhoid, when none of the sisters knew Siamese, when he himself was at odds with the decisions they were making, when the Superior General came perilously close to recalling all four missionaries.

"The first four apostolic workers were full of zeal and enthusiasm, fervor and good spirit; they rapidly won all hearts," he continued. It was clearly Bernard Mancel, however, whom he considered responsible for the success of those first years and her departure for China the beginning of a downward spiral:

Above all, when Mother Marie Bernard arrived who had such a long experience of mission life, there was a still greater impetus; many pupils began to arrive and their number increased year by year. When Mother Bernard left *Mater Dei* to found *Regina Coeli*, Mother Maria-Raphaela succeeded her at Bangkok and since she was already well-

known and highly esteemed, the Institute did not suffer from this change of superior.

When Mother Bernard was sent to Swatow, this was a disastrous blow for both Institutes. The successive changes in superiors: Mother Raphaela, Mother Marie de Lourdes, Mother Gemma, Mother St. Ignace, Mother Agnès--all these successive changes which have taken place have been a real affliction for both establishments.

But although Perros was undoubtedly glorifying the first years, he was accurate in his assessment of the difficulties caused by rapid and unheralded changes.

The legislation concerning schools in Siam has become very complex in these last years....The directress of the school, the prefect of studies must have higher degrees and all the teachers must have certificates and have passed the Siamese language examination, otherwise they do not have the right to teach....When a superior keeps informed, knows the legislation, and has passed her examinations and is thus in a state to exercise her charge competently, then when at that moment she is changed and everything has to begin over again, great harm is done to the progress of education and to the administration of the house.

In spite of the veneration I have for Canon Law and the prescriptions of the Church, I cannot help but deplore the necessity of making a change every six years....The Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres who have many houses here have asked and obtained that their superiors and prefect of studies remain in place....The consequence is that the number of pupils has increased considerably while at *Mater Dei* the growth in the last few years has been far from sufficient. If we could have Mother Marie Bernard back for *Mater Dei*, I

am convinced that we would move quickly forward once again. She has done a great deal at Swatow and although one mission should not be deprived for the sake of another, yet if she could not remain there or if she had a capable replacement, I would beg that she be sent back to Bangkok. In addition to her we have had excellent superiors in Mother Raphaella and Marie de Lourdes; the others--although good religious--lack the scope of directing an establishment such as *Mater Dei*.

At the same time as Perros dispatched this letter to St. Jean Martin, he also wrote more concisely to Marie de Lourdes. The burden of his letter was to deplore that "the spirit of the house is no longer what it was." In place of the family spirit which had signalized *Mater Dei* in the past he now observed a spirit of authority which was sometimes exercised very harshly and which turned away the young Siamese who were "so timid and sensitive." Instruction, he commented, can be given by anyone, but our goal is education and this is achieved only when you know your pupils, when they love you, when there is a true family spirit.

"I would be so happy," he concluded, "if we had a 'Mother' such as you or Mother Bernard or Mother Raphaella who would mingle with the children, get to know them, and interest herself in them."

It was a plea from the heart made at a time when Perros felt alone and abandoned. His request for funds to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda had been met with only partial success. A small sum of money would be given for the upkeep of the seminary but nothing would be given toward the schools run by the Ursulines, Cardinal Fumasoni-Biondi had informed him. In his mission report that year Perros wrote that they had little success to report. They were working in a particularly barren field, he commented. "The grain we sow doesn't thrive as we would like...the preoccupation with material things, with the search for comforts" often stifled good resolutions. "Inconstancy which is the major trait of the

Siamese makes them tire very quickly of the submission to the evangelical precepts and fidelity to their Christian duties."

In fact the situation of the Church in Siam was far less bleak than Perros painted it. During his own administration he had brought in two important congregations: the Ursulines and the Carmelites. He had ordained thirty-five young Siamese men to the priesthood. After years of waiting he had succeeded in opening up the north to evangelization.

But the situation of the Ursulines and the possibility that they might close one of their schools weighed heavily upon him. The reply he received in mid-February from St. Jean Martin did nothing to allay his concerns. She understood, she assured him, that all the changes made in the last few years must indeed seem regrettable but affirmed that with the limited personnel available, no other course had been open to her. In fact, she feared that the province of the north of France would soon be unable to be responsible for Siam. "I have studied the question and I tell you in strict confidence that my fear is that we may have to attach Siam to one of our American provinces." But, she assured him, no decision would be taken before the meeting of the General Chapter in the fall of 1938--just six months away.

As for his esteem for Mother Bernard, she was deeply touched by it. "I would be very happy to bring her back to Siam as you wish but I find it more prudent to leave the choice of prioresses to the Mission Council to which our Constitutions give this right."

It was a letter at once respectful, understanding, sympathetic--and uncompromising. Perhaps he had expected nothing more, since in the past his suggestions to St. Jean Martin had been received with deference but not with acceptance. It was, however, a sentence inserted in a paragraph close to the end of the letter which must have astonished him. "It pains me," St. Jean Martin wrote, "to think of *Mater Dei* once again without a prioress, but," she continued, "Reverend Mother Marie Raphaela Vurnik who has just been named Superior of the Mission will take care of this with the help

of her Council." Raphael who had been the only constant in the shifting pattern of authority had now become an object of change herself.*

Perros' cogently argued advice, had, it seemed, fallen on deaf ears. In response to his detailed letter, deploring the rapid changes which had so unsettled *Mater Dei* and citing the absolute necessity for a more stable regime, he now found himself face to face with yet another major shift.

* See Appendix C for the full text of this letter: St. Jean Martin to René Perros, February 5, 1938.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"RUMORS OF WAR"

In mid-January 1938, Raphael Vurnik received an airmail letter from the French provincial, Chrysostôme Oudin, informing her of her new appointment as Superior of the Missions. Nothing, it seemed, had prepared Raphael for this. She had returned from Java only six months before and her health, although much improved, was hardly robust. The day the letter arrived she had been so busy that she had had no time to read it until evening. "The news had been completely unexpected," she wrote some days later to Marie de Lourdes. "Fortunately evening prayer and the night were able to hide my emotion and the next day the community thought I had a little cold."

Her tears were not only for her own loss, for she dearly loved *Regina Coeli*, but they were also tears of anxiety, for no one knew so well as Raphael the suffering that these constant changes in authority were imposing on sisters who were already enduring the unalleviated sacrifices of mission life. Five years earlier they had experienced the loss of Marie de Lourdes. Now, it seemed, that same pattern—with its troublesome consequences—was being repeated at an even more difficult juncture. Had Raphael been privy to Bishop Perros' letter to St. Jean Martin, written that same month, she would have agreed with the bishop wholeheartedly.

By February 11 her nomination was announced to both communities and three days later Raphael left Chieng Mai for Bangkok where there were some financial affairs for her to attend to. Her primary purpose, however, was to begin her canonical visitation of *Mater Dei* which, she knew, demanded a firmer hand than Agnès Delattre was capable of exercising. A letter from Ignace Six in Java obliged her to abandon any hope that she might return to Siam. Her months in Java, Ignace wrote, while helpful, had not cured her and the doctors were now advising a permanent return to her own country where the climate, the food, and the general familiarity might return her to health. Thus Raphael, despite her misgivings, had no choice but to continue Agnès Delattre as delegate superior.

Regina Coeli would be under the leadership of Gemma Feeney. Once again, it was far from an ideal choice, for although Gemma was capable and generous, she lacked the softer qualities needed in a community where more than half the sisters suffered from chronic ill health. The most positive news was the promise of a young American missionary soon to join them and the continued success of Marie Joseph, their first Siamese vocation, who was showing remarkable ability at the university in Bangkok. She would, Raphael hoped, soon be able to assume a position of responsibility in the schools where government regulations were making it more and more difficult for westerners to qualify.

Raphael had hardly time to adjust to her new situation before she was called to attend the provincial chapter in France, a preparation for the General Chapter to be held in Rome the following September, 1938. Toward the end of March she bid farewell to the *Mater Dei* community and boarded the train for Singapore where she had arranged to meet Bernard Mancel who would travel with her to Europe.

It was an uneasy time to travel, for war and rumors of war besieged them on every side. Across the northern border into China the conflict with Japan continued. Following the successful creation of a Japanese state in Manchuria in 1931 (now Manchukuo), Japan continued its aggression. By 1938 Peking, Shanghai and Nanjing had fallen before its superior--and

brutal--armies. As Japanese forces continued south there was increased anxiety that Swatow might well be in their path. In fact, letters from Swatow to Rome clearly indicated that the sisters were already suffering the hazards of war. The wealthier class had already left the city; the number of abandoned children was growing to unmanageable proportions, while the nuns themselves waited day by day as the sound of bombing came closer.

While Beatrice Hanson, in the relative peace of Bangkok, assured her family that they were thousands of miles away from such trouble, Fabian Waters, writing to her friend, Sister Justin McKiernan in February, 1938, commented: "The Sino-Japanese War continues. Many are of the opinion that if the Japanese win, it will be a matter of only a few years before Siam is theirs too. Their influence is very strong even now."

By the time Raphael returned from the provincial chapter the following August, the possibility of a European conflict had become imminent. Hitler, determined to annex that part of northern Czechoslovakia known as the Sudetenland, had cowed France, Italy and Great Britain into signing the Munich Pact which acknowledged his right to such annexation. Although the purpose of the Pact was an effort on the part of the Allies to placate Germany and thus halt its aggression, in fact it led only to further arrogance and inevitable conflict.

Although Raphael had been able to visit Yugoslavia, her homeland--her first visit since she had left in 1924--it had been a trip made difficult by a sense of increasing hostility everywhere. It was very clear that the "rumors of war" were soon to become a reality. Once back in Siam, however, she was immediately plunged into the problems of the mission. Her responsibilities must have been daunting even for someone of Raphael's abilities. In addition to her new office, she continued to be canonical superior at *Regina Coeli* and unofficial superior at *Mater Dei*, for as yet no one had officially replaced Ignace Six. In her position as superior of the Missions, she was now responsible for China as well as Siam. Decisions about personnel

weighed heavily on her and on the boat returning to the Orient she wrote at length to Marie de Lourdes, outlining some of the possibilities.

Bernard Mancel, she suggested, should be reappointed prioress of Swatow for another term. Agnès would continue as sub-prioress at *Mater Dei*. Since Gemma was scheduled to go to Rome for her tertianship, someone was needed to replace her at *Regina Coeli*. Perhaps Fabian Waters might be able to fill this post. Although Fabian tended to become nervous and anxious when faced with the unexpected, Raphael observed, yet she was mature, prudent, and an excellent religious. They were soon to lose, temporarily, another good teacher at *Mater Dei*. St. Jean Ruegg had developed cataracts in both eyes and must be sent to Java as soon as possible since there was no doctor skilled in such delicate surgery in Siam.

Financial problems continued to plague them and the insecurity of the government led Raphael to fear that they might be facing the same situation as religious had suffered in Germany where the government had confiscated all religious property. The most pressing issue was the debts incurred by Bernard Mancel in beginning *Regina Coeli*. Although there was no perfect solution to the problem, it seemed to Raphael that the best course of action was to keep the school at Chieng Mai small since they had very few religious certified to teach and the cost of increasing the number of lay teachers was prohibitive.

The fact that on her return to Chieng Mai she found the entire compound flooded, with everything under water, did not raise Raphael's spirits. The floods were the worst they had ever experienced. The children could not get to school; the priest could not come for Mass. If the water were to interfere with the railroad, she wrote, she didn't know how Gemma would be able to make the train trip to Singapore from whence she planned to leave for Europe.

The following month, however, Raphael received the announcement she had been hoping for: the Siam Mission was to be affiliated with the Vice-Province of Java. This measure had been Marie de Lourdes' initiative and

one with which Raphael had concurred. "I am very grateful," she wrote to St. Jean Martin, acknowledging, however, that there would be some sorrow in this change: "My heart is attached to this dear province [France] and I know that the separation will be painful for some." Some weeks later she received a letter from the Dutch provincial, Ildefonse de Jong, informing her that she and a companion would come to visit Siam probably in the month of December.

As it turned out, December was to become a banner month for Siam, for the young king, Ananda Mahidol, who at the request of the recently formed Assembly had ascended the throne in 1935 at the abdication of the unfortunate King Prajadhipok, returned to Siam as king for the first time. Just ten years old at the time of his accession, he had been studying in Switzerland where he had remained until this first visit in December 1938. As part of his celebration he invited fifteen pupils from various schools who had been born in the same year as the king to a reception at the royal palace. This was especially significant for *Mater Dei* for, as a little boy, he had attended the Ursuline school for a while. Raphael and Xavier accompanied the students chosen from *Mater Dei* and although the king did not seem to recognize Raphael, she was immediately recognized by the king's mother. Emboldened by the joyful welcome, Raphael invited the king to pay a visit to his old school. The invitation was accepted and the date set for December 21.

As though such an event were not sufficient, four days earlier the anticipated visit of the provincial of Java took place. Ildefonse de Jong arrived by train on the morning of December 17, bringing with her a companion, Sister Françoise Boom, and the long-awaited American missionary, Mary Charles Roberts from the central province of the United States.

Mary Barbara Roberts was a farm girl, born in the little town of Silex, Missouri in March 1914. At the age of eighteen she had entered the Ursuline novitiate at Alton, Illinois. Following her temporary profession, she had taught for several years in Decatur, Illinois. Then came the call to

the missions which changed her life. In the summer of 1938 she traveled first to France where she spent several months studying the language and then, in the company of Gerard Farget and Anne Marie Sébert--destined for China--she continued by train to Genoa. Here she met Ildefonse de Jong and with her made the final lap of her journey--first by boat to Singapore and then by train to Bangkok.

Mary Charles' arrival at Bangkok came at a dramatic moment. Not only was the mission welcoming its new provincial but the community was in the throes of preparing for a royal visit. She was wide-eyed at the elaborate ceremonies and her first letter home was full of details about this solemn affair. Even those accustomed to Thai ritual admitted that the necessary protocol taxed their ingenuity. "The reception of a king is no small affair!" wrote the convent annalist who provided a detailed account of the event:

There were protocols and protocols....We borrowed gilded armchairs, silk upholstered chairs, and little ceremonial tables in Thai style. The Chinese church in Calvary kindly lent us their newly-bought carpet. A few hours before the visit, a group of the royal bodyguard came to inspect the place where the reception was to be held.

At 10:30 all is ready, everything decorated with flags, palms, pupils. At 11:15 we hear the trumpet announcing the arrival of the king. The orchestra begins....As the royal yellow car enters the school grounds, *Mater Dei* pupils line the two sides of the way. The car stops and the King descends and ascends the staircase. the Guides make a solemn "Salute" and march in military fashion, following the King and his entourage.

Joyfully we greeted the King, his mother and his younger brother. At that time *Mater Dei* had no assembly hall, so we had removed the partitions between four classrooms and made an auditorium, with brand new wings. The pupils put

on the play "Esther" in English and sang some songs in French. The play and the greetings in Thai went smoothly. The royal family seemed pleased....By 12:40 it was all over. Our pupils shouted joyfully "Chai-yo" as the royal car left our gate.

The day following the king's reception, the Dutch visitors, accompanied by Raphael, traveled to Chieng Mai. Everyone was aware of the importance of this visit for there was serious consideration of closing *Regina Coeli* unless some solution could be found for its continued financial problems. Ildefonse, however, was of an optimistic temperament. Although acknowledging the difficulties, she also recognized the importance of the work *Regina Coeli* was doing in an area where Catholics numbered less than 100 in the entire city of Chieng Mai. The school, she decided, would continue, assisted by funds from Java. "Oh, the kind hearts of our Dutch sisters!" wrote the annalist joyfully.

It was immediately clear that Java would assist them not only financially but in other ways as well. Ildefonse, immediately recognizing the need for strong leadership at *Mater Dei*, appointed Raphael as the prioress. Although the necessity for Raphael to travel kept this from being an ideal solution, it would provide a firm hand on the rudder and keep the dissension within the community under control.

Mary Charles was sent at once to *Regina Coeli* with orders that her principal task was to learn the language and pass her Siamese examination as soon as possible. The long train ride tested her missionary mettle and she wrote home at some length how difficult it was to have no privacy during the seventeen hours it took to reach Chieng Mai. The preceding September, Fabian Waters had complained of the same problem but she--better prepared--had brought with her a supply of large safety pins with which she was able to secure curtains around her bunk so that at least while she slept she felt more protected.

No sooner had Ildefonse returned home than she began to search for a suitable prioress for *Regina Coeli*. The following month the mission learned that Ursula Savage, now serving in Java, would be the superior at *Regina Coeli*. Ellen Mary Savage had been born in September 1893 in Carlingford Lough--a little Irish town jutting into the Irish Sea. What drew her to dream of Java is hard to say but at eighteen she left Ireland to enter the Ursuline convent in Hertogenbosch, Holland, with the sole purpose of being sent to the Java mission. In 1914, shortly after her temporary vows and just at the start of World War I, she was sent to Buitenzorg in western Java. For the next twenty-five years she served in various positions in the vice province of Java and now, at the age of forty-five, she was asked to leave the country to which she had given her life and assume responsibility in a totally different culture. On March 14 she arrived in Bangkok and five days later she took up her duties at *Regina Coeli*.

The community that awaited her in Chieng Mai must have amazed her. Even Fabian Waters, usually optimistic in her letters home, wrote that summer: "Disastrous is just the word to describe the condition of the Ursulines in Siam...considering the health of the people out here, nothing but the grace of God has kept us going even this long." Of the six sisters who waited to greet the new superior, almost all were in a state of debilitated health. Of the two coadjutrix sisters, Jeanne Terrace was developing serious eye trouble and Teresita Lightwood had never recovered from a fall which had affected her central nervous system. Of the four choir sisters, Bernadette Farget was crippled with a foot problem that demanded surgery and Stanislas Bosnák struggled with chronic tuberculosis. Only Fabian Waters and the recently arrived Charles Roberts were in reasonably good health; but since Charles had not yet passed her Siamese language examination, she could not take her place in the school. Ursula, accustomed to the stable and efficiently organized schools of Java, must have found the situation disconcerting at best.

Their financial situation was aggravated by the fact that their registration was down to 149--100 fewer pupils than in the previous year. The decision to raise tuition in the hope of increasing their income had backfired, leaving

them more impoverished than before. Ursula Savage, although an experienced missionary, had never faced a comparable situation. Being of a practical disposition, such unswerving belief in Divine Providence in the face of what she must have regarded as reasonable doubt, must have tested her faith profoundly. "Everything is topsy-turvy at *Regina Coeli*," Fabian wrote to her sister in America later that year. But topsy-turvy though it was, they held on, convinced of the value of their work in this strongly pagan region and still imbued with Bernard Mancel's spiritual legacy: an unshakable trust in God's providential care.

In Bangkok, on the contrary, the sisters seemed to be reaping the rewards of their labors. By the summer of 1939 *Mater Dei* had 440 pupils registered. Even the Chinese school at Calvary, so dear to the heart of Agnès Delattre, and such a bone of contention with the government, had a sudden upward turn. Calvary had done its best to follow government regulations, stringent (and sometimes unreasonable) though they were. Other schools had been less compliant and now, as a result, a number of them had been closed. Suddenly Calvary found itself viewed as an exemplary institution with more children than they could handle. Although the nuns were happy at this opportunity to extend their apostolic missions, the dark side of this success was that since no Catholic Thai could be found with proper credentials, acceptable to the government, Calvary was placed under the direction of a Siamese Buddhist. The consequences were immediate: the schedule was turned upside down and the period for catechism suppressed on the grounds that it was contrary to the official school program. But the nuns, not easily worsted, set up catechism classes in early morning, before school officially began.

It was not only Calvary that suffered from government regulations that year. The strong movement of nationalism with its slogan of "Thailand for the Thais" was experienced everywhere. As always, the major thrust was felt by the Chinese population whose influence was regarded as dangerous. Soon all Chinese newspapers but one were closed down. New taxes were imposed. Some occupations were restricted to Thai citizens. And before

the year was out, Calvary—despite the heroic efforts of Agnès Delattre—was closed.

Never, wrote the author of the community newsletter, had the Ministry of Education issued so many prescriptions and regulated so many details. Nothing was left to chance: the style of the blouse, the length of the skirt, the choice of materials—even pupils' hair (which could no longer be curled) all came under government regulation. Students' blouses must have initials indicating whether they attended private or government schools--and further initials indicating the name of the school. "We tell our pupils," the writer continued in obvious annoyance, "that they should not be recognized by the letters on their uniforms but by their conduct."

But despite such exasperating regulations, *Mater Dei* was enjoying continued success. Several years earlier they had applied for permission to start a junior college but had been denied by the Ministry of Education. Now another plan, more practical and more useful, was being developed. One of the major decisions of the Ministry of Education had been the closing of all high schools. The majority of people did not need such an education, they maintained, affirming that those who finished Mathayom 6 had sufficient schooling for ordinary life. Those wishing to enter university would attend a special pre-university course given in a single government school. "As you can see," wrote Clotilde Angela McCan to her provincial in America, "this ruling is unfortunate for us as the girls must leave us just at the age when they really begin to understand and appreciate the Catholic faith."

Mater Dei's response to this decision was to initiate a "Finishing Course"--a three-year program which would enable young women who were not preparing for university to continue their studies in the environment of a Catholic school. The course would include the study of languages--the only school in Siam where Sanscrit would be taught--art, social activities and housekeeping management. This time permission was given and the nuns embarked on the arduous task of raising money for a new building.

Even as they took on additional work, the mission was losing some valuable members. In August Agnès Delattre, after fifteen years on the mission, left to make her tertianship. Teresita Lightwood accompanied her to France and then traveled home to England. Her deteriorating health had made it impossible for her to continue on the mission despite her passionate devotion to Thailand. The next three years Teresita spent, depressed and restless, unable to adjust to the religious life she found in England. In 1942 she reached a painful decision: she requested and received a dispensation from her vows. With that release came improved health and new energy. Within a year or so she had completed her nurse's training and by 1945 she was back in Thailand--a land she could not forget--to pursue her care of the Thai people as a nurse. In August of that same year Rita Buttell left to return to Harbin, which, she acknowledged, in her heart she had never left.

The sad departures at *Mater Dei* were balanced, however, by some welcome arrivals. Gemma Feeney, renewed by her tertianship returned that summer full of energy for the new venture of the Finishing School. At the same time they received--quite unexpectedly--a sister from Harbin: Augustin Jakcin. Augustin was truly a woman of the world. Born in Zagreb, she had made her novitiate in Tournai. Here she had spent the years of World War I. A talented linguist and musician she later joined a group of Polish Ursulines in Manchuria and had then stayed on when the community of Harbin had been founded. What propelled her to leave Harbin and come to Thailand remained a mystery but the struggling mission welcomed her with open arms.

That September Bernadette Farget who had spent the summer in *Mater Dei* while undergoing surgery returned to Chiang Mai, taking with her Theophane Westerman to help that depleted community. The floods had made train travel nigh to impossible and the trip took them almost twenty-four hours. Although flooding was a perennial problem at *Regina Coeli* it had never been worse than in the fall of 1939. Ursula was appalled for not only was the water rising to dangerous heights but worms, trying to escape their watery fate, were infesting the porches of the convent in hundreds. The kitchen, the laundry, the school and the convent were all distanced

from each other so that those going back and forth must either wade through water above their knees or slide along on a small raft improvised by the gardener. Since the water itself was swarming with scorpions, snakes and poisonous centipedes the trip was not only unpleasant but dangerous.

That summer an event occurred which was positive indication of the direction Siam as a nation was taking. On June 24 the ancient name "Siam" was changed to "Thailand." The thinking behind the change was clear. In December 1938 Phibunsongkhram (generally known as Phibun) had become prime minister. From the beginning, he indicated that he would brook no opposition. He controlled the press and used the medium of radio to expound his views. He was determined that the country be seen as a strong and independent power. Siam, he felt, was too generic a name. His goal was to distinguish the Thai people from other ethnic groups inhabiting the region. In addition, "Thai" meant "free" and it was as a Thailand--a free land--that he wished the nation to be viewed. In a region of the world where so many countries had been subjugated to western power, Thailand would stand unique.

But while Thailand was experiencing a new sense of nationalism, Europe was beginning to recognize that the policy of appeasement, symbolized by the Munich Pact, was failing. Hitler's annexation of Czechoslovakia was but his first arrogant step. For his next move he sought no diplomatic permission: secure in his power, on September 1, 1939, he invaded Poland. At once France and Britain declared war. On September 3 word reached the nuns in Thailand. Almost all of them--French, British, Italian, Slovenian, Slovakian, Dutch, Belgian--came from countries that would be deeply engaged in the war. Only the Americans stood apart, innocent of how profoundly they would be affected before the universal conflagration was over.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"THE LAND I HAVE LEARNED TO LOVE"

Although at the beginning of 1940 the war was still far distant, the sisters had already begun to feel its effects. It was more and more difficult to get letters through to Europe and even though Mother St. Jean and Marie de Lourdes were safely in America, it was not easy to keep them informed of the situation in Thailand. Early that summer Ursula Savage wrote from Chiang Mai: "It is very difficult to reach you at present, Very Reverend and dear Mother, so many letters have been lost or mislaid since the war began; one doesn't feel inclined to write letters until things are settled." In the same letter she acknowledged that despite their distance from Europe, Thailand was already beginning to show the effects of the war.

In Europe things are looking pretty dark at present and even here I don't think we are very safe....The Far-East seems to be on her guard, but God is good; we shall place all our confidence in Him and continue our work as usual.

Even before Germany and the Allies had officially declared war, Fabian Waters had commented on the state of alert in Thailand, although as she described them the preparations seemed more ludicrous than serious. In a letter to Joan of Arc Cronin, then Provincial of the Eastern Province of the United States, she had written:

Even Siam has caught the fever to the point that last week we had maneuvers for an air attack. As Chieng Mai possesses neither airplanes, nor bombs, nor caves, nor gas masks, nor anything else, it was really very funny. The only practical result was that we did penance by saying the Office of the Dead by candlelight with all the doors and openings closed, while Boy Scouts outside enjoyed themselves by blowing their whistles and making a noise that was supposed to be an imitation of an airplane.

Despite the rumblings of war, the nuns' efforts to maintain their schools--and in fact to enlarge them--continued unabated. In January 1940 Ildefonse de Jong returned to Thailand on her second visitation. This time she brought with her two coadjutrix sisters: Benigna Biemens who would remain at *Mater Dei* and Jeanne Marie van der Aalst who would go to *Regina Coeli*. Thailand could not have asked for more valuable assistance. Benigna (née Henrika) Biemens, born in Holland in 1904, had entered the Ursulines in 1923. Seven years later she had been sent to Java where she had spent the next ten years. Jeanne Marie (née Pauline) van der Aalst was also of Dutch birth, born in Eindhoven in 1909. At the age of twenty-three she had entered the Ursulines and less than a month after her reception had been sent to Java in November of 1932. Seasoned missionaries, they were to provide invaluable help during the next difficult years.

Ildefonse was to provide help in other ways, too. During her visit to Chieng Mai she authorized some essential construction to ease the impossibly crowded conditions under which the nuns were living and working. They were to have a new refectory for the sisters and another one for the boarders, a recreation room for the boarders, a new kitchen and a room that could be used as a study room for the sisters. These additions would be connected to each other, making it much easier in bad weather to go from one location to another. "How happy and grateful we'll be," wrote Ursula Savage, "happy to be able to reach the school and the kitchen without having to wade through the water [in times of flood] and grateful to our dear Lord and to our kind sisters in so many parts of the world, who

have made such big sacrifices in order to send us money to build this wing."

Ursula also arranged for another improvement: the care of Sister Mary Sheehan's grave. Horrified at how unkempt it was, she wrote at some length to Barbara Klaholt, provincial of the Central Province:

You will be glad to hear that we are having our dear Mother Mary's grave arranged. I never had the great pleasure of meeting her, but I have a feeling as if I had known her all my life. I can't tell you what I felt when I went to pay a visit to her lonely grave the first time. The black cross with those white letters: Mother Mary O'Sheehan said so much to my Irish heart. The first thing I said to M. Bernadette was, "How are we to get in there?" It was and still is a wilderness; the Protestant cemetery looks so clean and neat and ours so untidy and neglected. The Protestants have plenty of money to have theirs nicely done up, but the Catholics are very poor. Our dear Mother Mary found her last resting place among the poorest of God's poor. We'll have her grave nicely but very simply arranged and a new cross put up and the long grass and weeds cut down.

Mater Dei was also planning a new construction, a wing which would house the Finishing Class which Gemma Feeney was to direct. But that July, quite without warning, Gemma suffered from an embolism in an artery near her heart. She came close to death and, as Beatrice Hanson commented, had the doctor not been so quick and so skilful they would surely have lost her. That same month they said a temporary goodbye to Xavier Pirc who was sailing for Java to recover her strength after an almost fatal bout of typhoid.

Earlier that year they had lost another missionary. Fabian Waters had sailed for America in February. She had been plagued with ill health for some time--a question of exhaustion from the heat and the unremitting

work of the school, which precipitated a stomach ulcer. At first the suggestion was for her to go to Java but in the end it seemed safer and more sensible for her to return to her own country. It was a grievous loss for *Regina Coeli* and Ursula Savage wrote regretfully: "Mother Fabian was able to get on well with everyone; we missed her very much in the beginning and we still miss her keenly. It is really such a pity she had to go. She was the right person in the right place."

There was very little to encourage them in those dark months of 1940. Agnès Delattre had returned home from her tertianship that spring, renewed in spirit, but depressed and anxious by what she had seen in Europe. Yet nothing could have prepared them for the news that seeped through to them toward the end of May. Despite the reputedly impregnable defense of the Maginot Line protecting the eastern border of France, the German forces, having successfully invaded Belgium, swept into France. Their war machine seemed invincible and on June 14 the nuns learned that the Germans had entered Paris. For the French sisters—Bernadette Farget, Véronique Poutrain, St. Jean Ruegg, Agnès Delattre—it must have seemed like the end of the world. So far, their greatest suffering had been their isolation and their concern for those they loved, but by the end of that year the war was to touch them with a heavy hand.

With hostilities sharpening on all sides, in the summer of 1940 Thailand itself began to move toward war. The enemy, strangely enough, was France. Despite the fact that the Catholic mission in Thailand had been initiated by the French and was considered a French institution, relations between France and Thailand had never been warm. Other Western powers--Germany, Great Britain, the United States--exerted far more economic and political influence than did France. The coolness may have had its roots in a series of hostilities going back to the late nineteenth century when the French had usurped territory which the Thai maintained was rightfully theirs. Now the issue came to the fore again. Thailand, aware that the French were weakened by disasters in Europe and fearful that the Japanese were about to extend its military power into Indochina,

(territory which they hoped to repossess) initiated military action against the French.

Such action had already been anticipated by the growing spirit of nationalism which Phibul, prime minister since 1938, had been encouraging, with his development of the Thai military and his pro-Thai legislation. By November 1940 the undeclared war in Indochina began to have frightening repercussions for French missionaries in Thailand. Patriotism ran high and, inevitably, all French were seen as enemies. As always in such situations a radical group emerged, calling itself "The Thai Blood Party." In a newspaper article, signed only, "A Patriot," the position of the party was made clear. The Catholic religion, propagated by French missionaries, was a tool for undermining Thailand.

The Roman Catholic Religion is a political religion of French in particular. When the French introduced that religion their aim was purely political, i.e. to annihilate Buddhism from Thailand in order to have more sway over the people....It is a fact which cannot be refuted that the French [missionaries] have made use of the Roman Catholic Religion to destroy the Thai race.

It was a heavy charge which carried weight with the people. Thus, not only were all French the enemies of Thailand, but all Catholics and those who sympathized with them as well. The Thai, compliant by nature, were now faced with the accusation that to be Catholic was to be a traitor to their homeland. Even indigenous priests were affected, particularly in the light of threatening letters sent by the Thai Blood Party. Father Kosol Upasuwarna in Phanat, a town south of Bangkok, received the following letter:

Whereas the unanimous opinion of the Thai Blood Branch at Phanat is that the crosses placed at the top of the church building and in other places in the Roman Church of which you are in charge, is an unpleasant sight to the eyes of the

Thai Blood Party, we pray you, therefore, to remove immediately all those crosses as it is in your power. If you do not do it, the Thai Blood Party will take the matter in hand and do as it pleases.

When the priest who had received the letter took it to the police, asking for protection, he was assured that no harm was meant. In fact, the church compound was sacked, crosses and statues thrown down and hacked into pieces, and the church itself almost destroyed by fire.

Such threats with their dire consequences were difficult to withstand. Even more difficult to resist was the accusation of being a traitor. Many of the native clergy, caught in the impossible bind between being a faithful Thai or a faithful Christian, chose the former. The results were devastating, as Father Chorin described at length in a long report sent to the Apostolic Delegate on February 24, 1941. At the Church of the Immaculate Conception where Bishop Perros was to have presided over the sacrament of confirmation, the doors were barred and the bishop himself prohibited from entering. Although a German priest was found to administer the sacrament, this did not end the violence. Later two French priests were stoned as they left their church during an anti-French demonstration. And, as Chorin noted sadly, some of the ring-leaders in this display of patriotic violence were former Thai priests.

The propaganda of the Thai Blood Party reached everywhere in their efforts to intimidate the people. In Bangkok a handbill was circulated on the streets giving specific orders of how to deal with Catholics:

Avoid any intercourse with anybody, male or female, siding with Catholics.

Do not sell any goods to the Catholics.

Be very careful with these people.

The Fifth Column (spies) come from this group of people.

Do not tell any secret or any news to these people.

The radio provided an additional channel for anti-French propaganda, some programs going so far as to cite the names of those Christians who had recanted and publicly commend them.

Even in the north, the anti-French spirit was strong and Chieng Mai as well as Bangkok suffered from the hostile atmosphere. "Times are very, very bad," Theophane Westerman wrote to Marie de Lourdes, "All foreigners are disliked. People shun our teachers and children for going to a foreign school and not a Buddhist one. The latter fact deserves notice. Fears for a religious persecution are far from groundless."

Further evidence of such persecution came toward the end of November when rumor ran that a number of French priests had been told to leave the country within forty-eight hours. Although this order was later revoked, the annalist at *Mater Dei* wrote, "The situation of the French living in Thailand becomes more and more alarming."

A few days later Beatrice Hanson--in the hope of getting a letter through to the United States--wrote to Barbara Klaholt:

These are momentous moments for our mission as well as for Thailand--the land I have learned to love so well. We do not know what the future holds for us but our annual retreat which begins this evening will be a fit preparation for whatever is to follow, whether it be the usual strenuous life or the sacrifice of seeing all smashed to smithereens! Anyway, we know we are in God's hands.

Some time earlier, on November 6, Raphael had written at some length to St. Jean Martin, then living at Mt. St. Ursula in New York City, explaining that because the Mission was "considered as a French political body" the present conflict might have "unpleasant consequences for our work here." She was further concerned about the future of their schools if at some point all foreigners were asked to leave. She was looking into the possibility of having their property transferred to the Thai sisters (Joseph Marie

Dardarananda and Angela Tan) so that in such an eventuality everything would not be lost. The bishop agreed, she explained, that this was a prudent decision and Sister Joseph Marie's father was investigating the process with the help of a lawyer.

At the beginning of 1941, the blow which they had feared finally fell. On January 7 all French citizens were required to be registered with the government. Although in itself this was not a disastrous measure, Bishop Perros feared the next steps and advised the French nuns to leave as soon as possible. At once Raphael sent word for Bernadette Farget to come down to Bangkok. *Regina Coeli* had already received word of this new demand. At 9:30pm on January 6, just as they were retiring, word reached them that all French must leave by midnight of the same day. Theophane Westerman, in the letter to Marie de Lourdes already quoted, painted a graphic picture of the next few frenzied hours:

As the express [train] left only the next day, doubtless [we thought] that Mother Bernadette would languish in the local prison overnight! Quick to change into black and get a valise packed before the police came....All ready in an hour. The police car roared by, stopped at Father's house, went on to Montfort [College] and then came back again. Eight policemen tramped into the house. We would have all fainted had we not been afraid of missing something. However, the police eyed the valise with surprise and said MB need only go to Bangkok on the express next day. What a relief! Mother Stanislas fell heir to accompany her....At the station the valises were unpacked and searched....All the people and children who came to see the French off had their names taken by the police. Really they are zealous!

Bernadette and Stanislas arrived in Bangkok on January 9 and on January 11 the four French nationals (Bernadette Farget, Véronique Poutrain, St. Jean Ruegg, and Agnès Delattre) sailed for Java. The emotions of those left behind were complex: there was the sorrow of saying farewell to dear

sisters with no assurance that they would ever meet again; there was fear that the passage to Java might be unsafe since much of the water had been heavily mined; and there was the gnawing anxiety of how they would be able to carry on with such reduced numbers.

Within a few days all French missionaries had been forced to leave the country. Later that same month thirteen French priests departed for Hong Kong, leaving very few to carry on the work, for some of the faithful Thai priests, accused of loyalty to France, were temporarily imprisoned.

Even the departure of the French nuns did not stop the harassment. One morning the nuns found an ominous sign affixed to their gate: "Attention! There is a Fifth Column here!" In one respect, however, they were fortunate. Most western schools had English, French or American directors; these were now summarily dismissed and replaced by Thai appointees, thus insuring firm government control. At *Mater Dei*, however, both the superior (Raphael Vurnik) and the head mistress (Xavier Pirc) were Yugoslavian nationals--a country not yet involved in the war, thus making it possible for them to continue in their office.

While the nuns were determined to continue a normal school schedule, daily life became increasingly difficult. Their own small resources had been used to pay the passage to Java of the French sisters. Money from outside--even if it could have reached them--could no longer be used in Thailand. Foreigners were held in disrepute everywhere. In the market, the Thai were fearful of selling to westerners. Bicycle-taxi men--men who had once been the sisters' friends--turned away from them. "Even the governor," Theophane wrote from Chiang Mai, "when asked to assist a French priest would not lift a finger." Although it was encouraging when, at the beginning of February, the radio carried the government condemnation of The Blood Party and The Love of Country Party, reminding the people that foreigners must be treated well; yet further disturbances made it clear how ineffectual such pronouncements were.

The church at Chieng Mai was already suffering persecution. On January 24 all Thai teachers were called to a meeting to which Europeans were not invited. But at the conclusion of the meeting two Thai sisters came secretly to tell the nuns what had happened. For over two hours they had listened to ridicule directed at the Catholic religion. Within two days, they were told, all Catholics would have to renounce their faith. Should they refuse, then "anyone could do anything to them that they wished." It was a terrifying threat and that evening the Thai sisters again came secretly to ask advice about what best to do. As they sat talking and planning for the future they heard a shot close by. It was a random shot and no one was hurt but, as Sister Benigna noted in her diary, "We knew now that it was serious." *

The events of the following morning, Benigna noted carefully:

I am going to the church for 5:30 a.m. Mass, the others will attend the second Mass at 6:00. It's eerie in the dark, but the thought that there is nothing better than to die for Christ wins out and I enter the church where all the native Sisters are praying. After Mass the priest turns and looks at me. I understand and go to the altar, stretch out my hands, and Father slips the ciborium into my right sleeve and the chalice into the left. I leave the church with these treasures, cross the street to the house where they would be hidden.

The following day Father Bunchu was told by the leading men of the city that the cross must be removed from the roof of the church within twenty-four hours; if it was not, the church would be burned. The next day, January 27, was the feast of St. Angela but this year there was no festivity. A simple mass was said before dawn and the rest of the day the nuns--and all the frightened Catholics--waited in anxiety. Father Bunchu, when approached a second time, answered without compromise: the cross would

Much of the material about events from January 1941 to the end of the war is provided in an invaluable journal kept by Benigna Biemens. For the full text see Appendix D

remain. Thus the hours passed waiting to see if the threat would be carried out.

As the deadline approached, the seven Ursulines left their convent to go to the church, "to protect it if necessary." They were ready, as Sister Benigna noted in her diary, to be inscribed in the Book of Martyrs. But despite anonymous letters and verbal threats that all Catholics would be burned alive unless they recanted, nothing happened that day or the next. Throughout January and February the atmosphere of menace continued. More fearful for the native sisters than for themselves, the nuns did what they could to comfort and strengthen them. Meanwhile they gathered their belongings together, ready to go at a moment's notice if this should prove necessary.

At *Mater Dei*, conditions though unpleasant were less dramatic; and under Mother Raphael's calm direction, they continued a normal life as best they could. Calvary school was closed once again to the anguish of Agnès Delattre who persisted, unsuccessfully, in her petitions to the Ministry of Education. With the departure of the French sisters, the curriculum at *Mater Dei* had had to be adjusted for they were no longer able to offer full classes in French.

Along with these serious inconveniences, they were now faced with ludicrous demands to adjust the Thai mode of dress in order to keep up with "civilization." One of the directions was that everyone must wear hats. There was to be no exception--not even the conductors on the train could accept women passengers who had no hats! The annalist wrote in exasperation: "Word from the Ministry of Education that some children must take part in the parade celebrating the revolution. And they must all have hats! Where are we to get them in just five days?....It's a little ridiculous. All this will soon pass."

In March arrangements were made for the annual community retreat, to be followed by a shorter retreat for alumnae. To their credit, forty of their former students participated despite the antagonistic environment.

Events in Indochina continued unabated with inflammatory accusations made by the French (now under the Vichy government in collaboration with Germany) that Thai soldiers had destroyed and desecrated places of Christian worship. The Thai, quick to retort, threatened to retaliate either by forcing Christians in Thailand to become Buddhists or by exterminating the Christians altogether. Under such conditions, the United States Embassy suggested that all American women and children leave at once; but the sisters (Beatrice Hanson, Clotilde Angela McCan, Theophane Westerman, Charles Roberts) responded that they would prefer to stay on, although well aware that the future could be perilous.

Shortly after their decision, Clotilde Angela wrote with rare perception to St. Jean Martin:

War clouds overshadow us here in the Far East also. The fact that we belong to the white race may yet make the continuance of our work impossible, for the Asiatic heart has been embittered by the dealings of the various governments which we, whether we wish to or not, must represent. We can change our language and culture and customs--but not, alas! our faces. If we could, I would willingly wear a yellow one.

Finally in May 1941 hostilities in Indochina were brought to an end with a peace treaty brokered by Japan and signed by both parties in Tokyo on May 9. With this news came hope of the return of the French sisters who arrived by boat on July 26. Véronique Poutrain, however, had stayed on in Java in order to begin her tertianship the following fall.

With the return of the sisters from Java some exchanges were made between the two schools. Bernadette Farget was to stay on at *Mater Dei* since the government would not permit the French to travel outside of Bangkok. Marcelline de Nijs, who had arrived from Java in the spring of 1939, would go to *Regina Coeli*. Clotilde Angela McCan had already been

transferred to *Regina Coeli* and had been replaced in Bangkok by Theophane Westerman.

Clotilde Angela's health was a continuing source of concern. She had been under doctor's care for some time and was considerably weakened by recurring attacks of amoebic dysentery. All of this had affected her spirit. Usually so buoyant and so inventive, she had lost her élan. Often in pain and always exhausted, she lacked the vitality to cope with the daily difficulties of mission life. As early as March 1941, she wrote at length to St. Jean Martin asking to be transferred from *Mater Dei*--or even to return home for a year to recover her health. She was finding it increasingly difficult, she explained, to meet the exigent demands of Gemma Feeney and Xavier Pirc, and even her superior, Raphael Vurnik, a source of comfort for most of the sisters, only increased her sense of loneliness and inadequacy.

Life at *Regina Coeli* was hardly a panacea for ill health. If anything, the sisters were more overworked than at *Mater Dei*. Ursula Savage who had been in the country a little more than two years was herself seriously ill. That summer she had suffered from recurrent hemorrhages and had been hospitalized for more than a week. Her anxiety was increased by their financial situation. Although their construction costs continued unabated, there was no longer the possibility of receiving money from Java. Their income was so depleted that they did not have even enough money to pay the doctors. "The doctor is very kind but it is clear that money is a problem for them too," Stanislas Bosnák wrote to St. Jean Martin.

Within a month of her arrival Clotilde Angela was seriously ill. The diagnosis: a tumor on her uterus. Because of her condition the doctor did not advise surgery but suggested that she might undergo radiation therapy at Bangkok. Even better, he strongly advised that she be sent back to her own country. Once again Clotilde wrote urgently to St. Jean:

On reading this news [of her tumor] you may reconsider my request to let me go home. Truly my reason for asking this

is that I may get the strength necessary to continue my missionary service here....I beg you also to send one, or if possible, two nuns to replace me. The Pacific passage is still quite safe, and Americans are going and coming constantly. Please also send the money for the passage, as we have none here, and Reverend Mother Raphael has written that at Bangkok they have none either.

The summer slipped away with no answer from America. In the fall Clotilde went up to the little place the nuns had in the mountains where she could have a complete rest. On her return she seemed stronger and on September 19 Ursula Savage wrote to Ildefonse de Jong in Java, "We really can't miss Clotilde now....if she were seriously ill, of course, we should have to miss her but thank God she is not. If she could stay on until the end of January, then we shall struggle on until the end of March."

In early October Clotilde Angela was in such severe pain that the doctor advised sending her to the hospital for a thorough examination. On October 10 having listened to the doctor's diagnosis, Ursula wrote at length to St. Jean Martin:

He says it is better to get her off to America as soon as possible. The whole cause of her trouble is the tumor, which should be attended to as soon as she gets to America. He advised me to take an American boat going via Singapore and Java, as this is the easiest and safest way to travel at present. He said, too, that someone should accompany her as far as Singapore, so as to look after her and arrange everything for her; he thinks she is rather weak to go that part of the journey alone. Once she is on the American boat, it will be all right, for then she won't have to change at all until she reaches the States.

By October 16 permission for Clotilde to travel to America had arrived along with \$600 US to pay for her passage, and plans were made

immediately for her to travel to Java and then on to America by plane. They were determined to avoid surgery at McCormick Hospital if at all possible, aware as they were of how fatal Mary Sheehan's appendectomy had been. Two places were reserved on a plane leaving Chiang Mai for Bangkok on October 22 and on that same day reservations on a second plane going to Java.

But on the morning of October 20 Ursula received an urgent call from Dr. Cort, telling them Clotilde had taken a turn for the worse and that immediate surgery was a life and death matter. It took over two hours to remove the tumor "as big as a grapefruit," Ursula reported, but the patient had responded well and the doctor spoke favorably of her recovery.

Four days later Ursula again wrote to Ildefonse in an optimistic vein. "She is on the way to recovery," she reported, although admitting that the patient was in great pain--to be expected, however, after such surgery. Raphael and Bernadette had arrived from Bangkok the day of the surgery and Raphael insisted on spending much of her time in Clotilde's room. Her blood matched Clotilde's and she wanted to be present should a transfusion be necessary, although that possibility was presently precluded by her high fever.

On October 28 her fever rose to 105. All efforts to give her blood transfusions were ineffective. In her letter describing Clotilde's sickness and death, Beatrice Hanson, her life-long friend, later wrote: "More letters came [from Raphael] and more dreadful news. I think it best to spare you a complete account of Mother's four weeks of agony. She suffered terribly for more than a week before the operation, so she went through a whole month of torture "

On the evening of November 5, her condition changed dramatically. Some time earlier she had been given an injection of morphine to quiet the intolerable pain. Shortly after 10pm, in the first pain-free hours she had experienced in weeks, she slipped away quietly. The doctor, the priest, her devoted nurses and all the members of the community were with her. As

soon as possible the next morning a telegram was sent to *Mater Dei*. Once again it was Beatrice Hanson, waiting in Bangkok, who described her response to that final word:

It was impossible to send telegrams that night. Everybody in Chiang Mai sleeps at night, so you can just wait until 8:00am to send your telegrams. But so far as I was concerned none was necessary. That night I saw our dear Mother, oh, so clearly. She was dressed in black and seemed rather sad. She said that she was going on a long journey and had come here to get her things. I awoke with a start and the conviction that she had passed away. I prayed for her most of the night and the next morning offered all my prayers for her. So when Mother Xavier came running up to Form VI to tell me that Mother had passed away I was not surprised. I had struggled with my feelings all that morning and when the girls sobbed, I wept with them....

It is remarkable that the only two Ursulines who have died in Thailand, have passed away at Chiang Mai, both were Americans, both died at the American Hospital after an operation and both were so young, Wednesday, November 12, will mark the tenth anniversary of our arrival in Thailand. Who would have thought, as we steamed up the Menam that memorable morning, that I would be the only one of the trio to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the event.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"WE CANNOT PROMISE YOU PROTECTION"

Within the month, their sorrow over the death of Clotilde Angela was subsumed in the cosmic grief of war. Until December 7, 1941, as one of the members of the *Mater Dei* community noted, the chief impact of the European conflict on them had been their sense of isolation, their inability to communicate and the harrowing anxiety of hearing no news from families in the war zones. On December 7, however, everything changed.

At 10:30 on the evening of December 7 (Thai time) the Japanese ambassador in Bangkok paid an official call at the residence of the prime minister informing him that Japan had declared war on the United States and Great Britain and asking for passage for Japanese troops through Thai territory. The timing was perfectly synchronized. When permission was denied, the plan to invade Thailand was put into immediate operation. By 2:00a.m. Thailand was attacked on several points on the Gulf of Thailand as well as from Cambodia in the east. Simultaneously, attacks were in progress on Pearl Harbor, Singapore, the Philippines. For the Thais with neither army nor navy adequately prepared, conflict was pointless and after only a few hours of ineffectual resistance the Thai government had capitulated with the assurance that the "independence, sovereignty and honor of Thailand" would be respected.

The whole strategy had been carried out with such expedition that the Thai people were hardly aware of what had happened. December 8 had been scheduled as the day of the Annual Exposition--an event in which all schools gathered to present their work--academic, artistic, etc. Early in the morning Mothers Raphael and Xavier packed a large car with the students' needlework and handicrafts and set off for the pavilion in the city park where the children's work was to be displayed. While they were still unloading the materials, a startling message came over the loud-speaker: Exhibition cancelled. America has declared war on Japan.

At once the nuns bundled everything back into the car and told the driver to return to *Mater Dei*. Mother Raphael and a companion went immediately to the American Legation to ask what should be done, especially for the American sisters. They found the Legation in turmoil. Although American officials were aware that American-Thai relations were far from cordial, while Thai relations with Japan had become increasingly friendly, they had had no preparation for this event and no one could predict what would happen next. To Mother Raphael's question, the answer was simply: "We cannot promise you any protection; do what you can."

In fact, the situation was to become more hazardous than even they anticipated. Had Raphael waited twenty-four hours, she would probably have been denied entrance for on December 9 the Legation was sealed off. Japanese soldiers, harsh and arrogant in their behavior, were stationed inside the building while sentries patrolled outside. No radios, newspapers or private visitors were permitted.

At once there were protests from the State Department because, in fact, the United States had not yet declared war on Thailand. Although Americans had been advised to leave the year before when hostility against westerners had risen to dangerous levels, yet most of them had stayed and there were now some 200 Americans living throughout Thailand, many of whom would be interned before a policy of repatriation could be put into operation the following spring.

The nuns spent the day waiting for news and attempting to keep the school on its normal schedule. The following morning, December 9, they had their first encounter with the Japanese. At 8:30a.m. a member of the Japanese military, accompanied by an interpreter, came to requisition *Mater Dei*. Parked at the gates were dozens of trucks filled with Japanese soldiers and munitions, waiting for a signal that would permit them to enter. Raphael's protests went unheeded. The nuns had three hours to evacuate, she was told. Shocked but still self-possessed, Raphael maintained that this was impossible. Her remonstrance was supported by a Thai official and by the French Chargé d'Affaires who had come to help them and who protested that such a decision could not be made without the endorsement of the Japanese ambassador. The Mission was under French protection, he pointed out, and to emphasize the fact he ordered the French flag to be hoisted over the school. Surely, he stipulated, French property could hardly be considered enemy territory since the Vichy government was now in collaboration with the Axis powers. His point was acknowledged and the order given for the trucks and soldiers to withdraw.

The nuns had won the first round but there were many more to come. Several hours later a soldier arrived, asking the nationalities of the sisters: were there any Americans? any English? what of the superior--what nationality was she? It was only the beginning of a long siege of harassment.

The following day, December 10, the convent annalist noted with irony, "our beloved enemies returned--they were hardly a pretty sight to us." . A Japanese colonel presented himself ("speaking very good French"). Once again Raphael explained that *Mater Dei* could not be requisitioned until an understanding between the embassies of Japan and France was reached. The colonel, "very polite," bowed and left. Since it seemed that a colonel was not of sufficient rank, the following day it was a Japanese general who came to arrange for the occupation of the house. He made it clear that he was determined to install himself and his staff and to billet 800 to 1000 soldiers in the area. But even rank was not sufficiently intimidating to change the nuns' position. Such a decision, he was told, could be made only

with the agreement of the embassies. On December 13 their visitor was a colonel with a command of English. Still nothing was concluded. "He left smiling," the annalist recorded, "saying, 'I'll be back!'"

On December 14, however, just a week after the invasion, it seemed that arrangements had finally been made for the Japanese to occupy the school, leaving the nuns the freedom of the convent. "One thousand soldiers on the property would surely change the look of things," the annalist noted wryly. Yet the days passed and the soldiers never came. Despite the general's determination ("We must have *Mater Dei*; it is very convenient for us"), negotiations stalled and the nuns meanwhile were able to keep the school open.

Anxious as these weeks were, they were relatively calm compared to the situation of the sisters in Chiang Mai. They, too, as in Bangkok were preparing for the Annual Exposition on December 8. Sister Stanislas Bosnák, later recalling that event, wrote, "That morning we left on tricycles, each one hidden behind bundles of material for the Exhibition. We went to our assigned room and began to work. To our astonishment there were no other schools there. After a while we received the message: 'No fair; the Japanese have invaded Thailand. We are at war!'"

They soon learned that the Japanese had also declared war on the United States and Great Britain. All English, American and Dutch nationals were advised to leave the country immediately. Almost at once the British Consulate was abandoned and the schools and hospital under the auspices of the American Presbyterians were closed. The staffs fled north to Chiang Rai and were thus able to reach the British-held territory of Burma. By December 12 almost all foreigners had departed and the nuns themselves were being urged to leave as quickly as possible. Before making a decision Mother Ursula went to see the governor to ask if he could offer them protection. But the governor, like everyone else, was caught in a web of uncertainty. Everything depended on the Japanese and no one was sure of what they would do. Already there were stories of atrocities committed by

Japanese soldiers. Were they true? No one could say with certainty but the future was too unpredictable for foreigners to risk.

There were at that time just seven sisters at *Regina Coeli*: Ursula Savage (Irish—although holding a British passport), Bernadette Farget (French), Stanislas Bosnák (Slovakian), Charles Roberts (American), and three Dutch sisters: Marcelline de Nijs, Benigna Biemens, Jeanne Marie van der Aalst. Since all their countries were now embroiled in the universal conflict, none of them could have remained with impunity.

Although no one seemed sure where they would find a safe haven, they were advised to travel north to Burma which--so far as anyone knew--was still under British control. Within a few hours they did what they could to secure the house, packed small suitcases to take with them, arranged to have Father Bunchu remove the Blessed Sacrament from the chapel, and gave some final instructions to the remaining servants. By 1:00p.m. they were ready. "With empty stomachs and sad hearts," wrote Sister Benigna in her diary, "we stepped into the bus that would take us to the station." At 1:30 they were on the train to Lampang from whence they hoped to find transport across the border into Burma.

Two Spanish brothers from Montfort College accompanied them--presumably as protection for the seven foreign women. The train trip was relatively uneventful despite their misgivings; but it was a slow trip, the hundred kilometers taking them a half-day. It was just 6:00p.m. when they arrived at Lampang where they were well treated by the police who assured them that they would be able to travel on the next morning. Although the train from Lampang to Chiang Rai was not running, a bus would be available. Hungry and tired but relieved at the news, they rented two rooms for the night at the hotel near the station. The accommodations were hardly sufficient for seven sisters and two brothers but they were glad for any place and consoled each other with the thought that next morning they would be on the last segment of their journey to Burma and safety.

After a sleepless night they were up at 4:00a.m. eagerly waiting for the bus they had been promised, unaware that during the night all buses had been commandeered by the Japanese to transport soldiers. At 6:00 cold, hungry, and surrounded by their luggage they still waited, unsure of what to do next. Although the people of the town were not hostile, they hesitated to help, fearful of the trouble that aiding foreigners might cause them.

The Chinese innkeeper, sympathetic with their plight, finally procured a cart driven by two horses which he offered for their trip. Desperate, they piled their luggage into the cart and crawled in on top of it, finding whatever small space they could. They looked at the horses in consternation; the situation was beyond their experience. Finally Sister Charles who had come from a farm family was urged into service. The youngest and the smallest, she squeezed into the available space and picked up the reins. Thus they left Lampang, on a cold misty morning, before sunrise, huddled together on what Sister Benigna called "The Flight into Egypt."

It was not long before they realized that this conveyance would never take them to Chiang Rai and the Burma border, but neither could they remain in Lampang where the growing number of Japanese soldiers was increasing the danger hour by hour. Finally at the suggestion of Ursula Savage, Charles directed her team toward the Lampang Catholic Mission. It was a grandiose name for a small, empty little house where occasionally a mission priest came to celebrate Mass. Poor as the neighborhood was, however, the people received them cordially, offering them something to eat out of their own impoverished store. Meanwhile the two brothers went back to the city in an effort to find some kind of transportation. For the next few hours the nuns waited in growing anxiety, fearful that something had happened to their two protectors. It was almost 10:00am when they returned with a bus which would take them all to Chieng Rai.

It was a long and difficult ride in which they were constantly stopped by police, their luggage opened and searched, their identification papers questioned. It was 6:00pm--and dark--when they finally reached Chieng

Rai--too late to continue the few remaining miles into Burma. Once again they had a fitful night, anxious about the presence of the Japanese, anxious about their permission to cross the border--and, as always, concerned about what arrangements could be made to take them there. But in the morning they found the authorities cordial: the necessary permission was granted and a bus was promised for 10:00am. The two brothers were not permitted to go further but the sisters were assured that police would accompany them and see to their safety. The prize, it seemed, was within their grasp.

The bus arrived as promised, its windows covered with blankets—ostensibly to provide protection for the nuns. But at the very moment of departure, the governor appeared with startling news. He had just received a telegram: the border was closed; their last hope of reaching Burma was destroyed. As they huddled together, looking at the now-useless bus, a further order arrived: they were to leave the city immediately. It seemed an impossible command, as Benigna noted in her diary: "Ya! Good! but where to? And how?"

But within minutes the impossible questions were answered in the form of a young man, a former pupil of the Brothers' school in Bangkok. Introductions completed, the young man assured them of proper transportation. When the nuns looked skeptical, he explained that he was the brother of the governor--and therefore had a little power! The fact that his sister was a teacher at *Mater Dei* had immediately endeared him to the Ursulines.

Several buses were waiting along the street but each driver, when asked, explained that he had been commandeered to transport soldiers. To the loyal alumnus, this was not an acceptable answer. The events of the next few minutes, Benigna noted graphically:

He called to the driver saying, "Turn your bus around and drive these Sisters to Lampang."

"No," was the answer, "I must drive soldiers."

He called to a second driver and received the same answer.

"You are not taking the soldiers, but these sisters."

"I have no gasoline."

"Buy some!"

"I have no money."

The young man was furious, kicked the driver and said:

"One, two, three, or you'll go to jail."

He didn't like that so the trip was arranged.

It was not a large bus and the group that entered filled it: one police officer, nine soldiers, seven sisters, two brothers, several Thais. After an hour of fairly comfortable travel, however, the bus veered off the road and stopped before a rice storage barn. "Everyone out!" was the command. They were to load thirty large sacks of rice. Would they fit? the passengers wanted to know. They soon found the answer. Pride of place was given to the rice--passengers were left to scramble about as they could, crouching at the side of the sacks or sitting on top with just enough room to keep their heads from bumping into the ceiling--provided the bus ran smoothly, hardly a possibility on a Thai road.

Under ordinary circumstances the trip back to Lampang could have been made in a day's travel but because of the enforced stops and the slow pace of the bus, by evening they had covered only one-third of the way. In mid-afternoon they had stopped for something to eat but despite their hunger it was far from an appetizing experience. "A Chinese restaurant," wrote Benigna, "at least it was called that, but I've seen cow stalls in better order than this." They were at least able to buy a loaf of bread and a roast chicken for an exorbitant price. Desperately weary and uncomfortable though they were, they were at the mercy of the driver who seemed in no hurry to move on. "He ate, talked, laughed as if he were in charge of heaven and earth," commented Benigna.

At midnight they made another stop. In a way they were grateful, for it gave them time to stretch their legs and breathe some of the fresh night air--so different from the heavy air of the bus and the dusty rice sacks with

which they were surrounded. Finally at 3:00a.m. they reached Lampang. Their driver stopped at a telephone booth to get orders about what to do with the "seven aliens"--as the nuns were described. Clearly even his superiors had no answer to the problem and when the nuns suggested that they be taken to the Mission it was accepted as a happy solution.

Even though they were awakened from their night's sleep, the Christians living around the Mission were gracious and helpful, opening up the little mission house and offering it to the sisters. There was little space and less furniture--a small cot and two benches. Everyone else found space on the floor. The next morning when they presented themselves at the police station, they found the Thai authorities genial and helpful. To their request to return home to Chieng Mai, the answer was an unqualified Yes: "Go in peace to your house; you should never have left," the police chief admonished them.

By 1:30 they were on the train to Chieng Mai. By 6:00 they had arrived. It was the evening of December 15. They had been gone less than three days but they had endured the experience of a lifetime.

Their arrival was greeted with both joy and confusion. The first person to meet them at the station was their old, faithful teacher, Mrs. Coomsang, who had met every train in the vain hope of seeing them return. Clearly no one else had expected them back. "It was almost dark as we rode through the gate," Benigna wrote. "The people cried out, leaped, jumped, making us quite nervous. Then the Fathers came; although they had been told, they had not quite believed the news." To the sisters themselves their return was unbelievable. They had said goodbye to everything, possibly forever, and now just a few days later they were opening the doors to their convent.

But once the door was opened, another surprise awaited them. The house was empty, totally cleared of everything. Furniture was gone; cupboards were empty. Apologetically Father Bunchu explained that since sisters had asked him to keep the house safe, he had felt that everything would be safer in his hands than with the Japanese. Even the meager supply of foodstuff

had been used and some of the precious chickens killed. "We had nothing; not even a grain of rice for a quick supper. Nothing but empty cupboards," Benigna noted in annoyance.

But soon Benigna was to be even more annoyed. The night before they left she had taken the precaution of hiding some foodstuff (canned milk, jam, butter, etc) in a large barrel buried in the chicken coop. After all, she reasoned, they did not know when they might return and in that case they would be glad to have these provisions. In any case, she was determined to save what she could from the Japanese. It had been a laborious task for she had had to dig a deep pit, roll the barrel into it, fill it, and then cover it again with earth and refuse so that it would not be visible to any inquisitive eyes.

She had kept her own counsel: "the more secret, the safer." But just before their departure she had confided her plan to Father Bunchu with the strict injunction to remove nothing until it was "absolutely certain" that the sisters would not be back. But Father Bunchu, fearful of the rumors that the Japanese intended to requisition the convent, had removed everything, leaving Benigna bereft of the stores she had counted on. The next week was spent trying to recover the convent possessions. Some of their furniture and much of their foodstuffs had been given to the poor and trying to recover them was a difficult task.

For two days they lived in comparative peace, then began a series of official visits. A group of Japanese soldiers, with loaded guns pointed at the nuns, began an inspection of the house. They measured, counted and assessed the building, evaluating its usefulness for them despite the fact that Ursula had informed them that the school had already been offered for use to the Thai government. Their next assignment was to ascertain the nationality of the sisters. Sister Charles Roberts, the only American, was the first to be targeted. As an enemy alien she was to be separated from the rest of the community who were forbidden any contact with her. The infirmary room in their new building became her prison cell. But it was not long before she had company, for the three Dutch sisters were subjected to

the same fate. Only the case of Ursula Savage remained to be determined. Ursula, an Irish national, was in fact not an enemy alien since the Republic of Ireland had declared its neutrality. But as Benigna noted wryly, "It has not yet reached Chieng Mai that Ireland exists," and so despite her protests Ursula was declared a British national and thus subject to imprisonment.

The community was now divided into "prisoners" (five sisters) and "free" (two sisters--Bernadette Farget and Stanislas Bosnák). In this case it seemed more sensible to put the "prisoners" in the old part of the convent and give the new building to the "free." The confinement was strictly enforced with sentinels on guard both night and day, so, as one of the sisters remarked, there were more guards than prisoners.

Even under these conditions the school was kept in session with Bernadette at the helm and Stanislas her first in command. Of the five prisoners, it was Benigna who was the most impatient, for she was not only separated from her kitchen but from the laundry and garden as well. Frustrated, she was forced to listen to the chickens cackling unable to go out to gather the eggs. As Christmas approached Benigna was determined that this season would not pass without something special. But what? All her cook's instincts were thwarted: everything she needed was in the kitchen and the kitchen was forbidden territory. But Benigna was not easily worsted. She made a list of all the things she would need to make Christmas cookies and cajoled one of the guards to take it to the kitchen and bring back whatever she needed. No doubt to everyone's surprise, he agreed, bringing Benigna the required ingredients and then trudging back once more to bring the completed cookies to the kitchen to be baked.

It was one of the few signs of Christmas the prisoners were permitted, for even their request to have Mass celebrated where they could participate was denied. A few little gifts (soap, toothpaste, holy cards) were sent to them by the "free" sisters. Nothing else could be done. Although for several days there had been rumors that all enemy aliens would be required to go to the concentration camp in Bangkok, no official word was received until Christmas day when they were told that they must leave Chieng Mai

at 8:00am the following day. Christmas afternoon was spent packing--the only time when both groups were permitted to speak together. But then at 5:00p.m. a policeman arrived with the news that the Japanese had changed the orders and that a lorry would come in ten minutes to take the sisters away. In those few moments Ursula was able to give them Holy Communion before a brusque Japanese soldier and a Thai policeman supervised their departure. Of those last terrifying moments, Benigna wrote graphically:

The bus came roaring in and an Oriental is at once before us with a gun and a bayonet, as if he must take on a group of bandits. He looks everything over and shouts something that no one understands, but we do understand that we must leave. No one to say goodbye to, because everything happened so fast there was no time to warn anyone. We leave; the Japanese soldier sits with his bayonet directly across from Reverend Mother Ursula. It is a fearful sight.

The nuns were not the only ones being rounded up. Along the route the bus stopped several times to pick up some Englishmen who were still in the process of getting dressed--so unexpectedly had they been forced from their homes.

At the station everyone was ordered out of the lorry with instructions to leave their luggage behind. Since there were no trains to Bangkok until the next morning the anxious nuns had no idea of what would happen to them overnight. Their worst fear of having to spend the night in a prison cell was somewhat allayed when they were led to a small house near the station. One room--with two beds and washing facilities--was given to the nuns; the other room--completely empty--was for the use of the Englishmen.

One of their servants who had cautiously followed and discovered where they were being kept was later able to bring them a hot meal from the two remaining sisters at *Regina Coeli*. The Thai policeman who brought it to them was clearly embarrassed and saddened by the rude treatment they

were being given. "I hope you understand," he explained to them, "that the way we are treating you is not our doing...but the Japanese have control." His apology, although it could not change their situation, touched their hearts. It was a comfort to know that not everyone was against them.

The next morning at 10:00a.m., exactly on time, they were ushered into a third class carriage on the train for Bangkok along with four Thai policemen to "guard" them. Since the police slept more than the nuns, their surveillance was light. Twenty-two hours later they arrived in the Bangkok station where there was more interminable waiting. No one seemed to know what was to happen to them. After a while the Englishmen were carted off to the concentration camp which had been set up in one of the buildings of the university. Still the nuns waited. Finally they were told they were to be brought to the police station. For more hours they sat together on a bench awaiting their destiny. Until, ultimately, after lengthy discussion, they were told that they would be interned at their convent! After a few more formalities they were loaded onto a bus and with more soldiers to guard them brought to *Mater Dei*.

Their good fortune was owed to the skilful diplomacy of Mother Raphael. As soon as she learned that enemy aliens were being identified and arrested, she presented herself to the Thai authorities asking that all sisters be permitted to remain at *Mater Dei* where she would assume full responsibility for them. They would observe all the regulations concerning aliens: they would not engage in politics, they would not use the telephone, they would not write letters, they would not leave the enclosure. She herself would be security for them. It was, as Beatrice Hanson later wrote, a gesture that pleased and in some way flattered the authorities. Her request was granted and for the remainder of the war no Ursuline was ever brought to the camp. Other religious did not fare so well; both Salesians and the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres were forced to evacuate their houses and to spend the next three years under arrest.

On January 1, 1942 there were fifteen Ursulines at *Mater Dei*, gathered to participate in the ritual New Year's greeting and to exchange the kiss of peace. At *Regina Coeli* there were only two, Bernadette and Stanislas, but soon Teresa Cito and Augustin Jakcin would be on their way to Chieng Mai to assist that diminutive community. So far, in God's providence, both groups had been kept safe. Despite all their threats the Japanese had not yet successfully requisitioned *Mater Dei*. The interminable dialogues that sometimes had taken place two or three times a day had so far ended in the Ursulines' favor. The difficult and frightening exodus from Chieng Mai that could so easily have had tragic results had ended in comparative safety. Most of all, they were still together and relatively unconfined. In whatever way they could--limited though it might be--they intended to keep their schools functioning.

When, later that year, the American and Thai governments made arrangements for repatriation, the three Americans refused. As the State Department documents record: "All the Americans in Bangkok, except for three or four women missionaries (who elected to remain) were repatriated." The decision of the Americans was the decision of them all. They had come to do a work they believed in; the work still remained and as long as it remained they would stay to carry it on.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“DANGER IS AT THE DOOR”

As the year 1943 began, it seemed that not a place in the world was free from the anxiety and brutality of war. The nuns had come to accept the painful sense of their isolation from relatives and friends in Europe and America but now the theater of war had moved into their own lives. Within less than a month they had experienced what it was to find themselves under the control of a foreign power. Diplomatically speaking, Thailand was not a subjugated country and the presence of the Japanese was not to be considered an “occupation.” The agreement that the Thai government had signed with Japan had stated clearly that Thailand remained an independent and sovereign nation. Yet it was all too clear that underneath the diplomatic language, the Japanese were in fact “invaders.” They were issuing the orders and Thailand had no means of holding out against their demands. The Japanese war machine had already proved itself invincible against far stronger military powers than peace-loving Thailand.

It must then have seemed almost like a symbol of the needless bereavement of war when on the first day of the New Year the nuns received news of the death of a dear friend, a young Japanese woman who died in childbirth. They had met Haruko through Miss Genevieve Caulfield, an American woman who had come to Bangkok in 1938 to open a school for the blind. Miss Caulfield was a remarkable woman. Completely blind herself, she

had learned to use her privation to help others. A highly educated woman, she had started a school for the blind in Tokyo and during that time she had adopted a thirteen-year-old Japanese orphan—Haruko. Within a few years the school was well established and Miss Caulfield was recognized as an exceptional educator.

During this time she was introduced to some Thai diplomats who encouraged her to come to Bangkok to begin a school for the blind there. But when, several months later, she arrived with her adopted daughter, Haruko, the people who had encouraged her had forgotten their generous offer of help, leaving her impoverished and bewildered. A fervent Catholic, she soon became a fast friend of the sisters at *Mater Dei* who did what they could to support her despite their own straitened circumstances. Soon, however, her cause was espoused by a group of generous Japanese businessmen. The man largely responsible for this support was Noboyuki Utangawa, who headed a committee to “develop friendship between Thailand and Japan.” With such assistance, the school flourished, as did the relationship between the lovely young Haruko and Mr. Utangawa.

Soon they were engaged to be married and, although Haruko was a Catholic and Mr. Utangawa a Protestant, arrangements were made for them to be married in the chapel at *Mater Dei*. “Love knocked on the hearts of these two Japanese children far from their homeland,” wrote the convent annalist with romantic joy. On April 16, 1941 the wedding was celebrated.

The sisters decorated the chapel as beautifully as possible. They removed the benches and arranged chairs in a semi-circle round the altar. The Japanese ambassador in a national costume of precious silk sat next to the American ambassador in a black full-dress suit. The chapel was filled with distinguished guests, representing many nations. Father Eylenbosch performed the marriage ceremony in English and explained its importance in Japanese.

Outside the chapel after the ceremony, one could hear the popping of champagne bottles. The guests drank to the happiness of the young couple before they disappeared in their cars. The sons of Japan and America shook hands in a friendly manner. No one dreamed that the tragedy of war between two countries was so near.

Nine months later, during the same weeks that war was declared between Japan and America, Haruko and Noboyuki looked forward to the birth of their first child. On December 28, just three days after Christmas, Haruko entered St. Louis Hospital. The doctors predicted twins and advised a Caesarian delivery. That same night at 6:00p.m. she gave birth to a boy and a girl—Noboyuki (Joseph Samuel) and Haruko (Maria Teresa). “I didn’t know a man could be as happy as this!” exclaimed the joyful father. It was, alas, one of his last hours of joy for although Haruko had seemed to endure the operation well, she did not regain her strength. In the next few days it was clear that she would not recover. On January 1 the nuns at *Mater Dei* learned of her death.

For a few weeks the infants were kept at the hospital and then, following their baptism on January 6, brought to the home of Miss Caulfield. The following month the grief-stricken father was called to Burma, now in Japanese hands, but in May he presented himself at *Mater Dei* again—this time to ask for the grace of baptism. Shortly after, his duties recalled him to Burma. From time to time word about him filtered into Bangkok. Faithful to the grace of his baptism, he did what he could to alleviate the suffering of those imprisoned in the harrowing Japanese concentration camps in Burma. There are no further records of what happened to Noboyuki Utangawa or his twins. They were, like so many others, lost in the disruption of war.

Meanwhile as the nuns at *Mater Dei* mourned the death of Haruko, Augustin Jakcin and Teresa Cito were traveling north to Chieng Mai to assist the only two sisters left there. The train was crowded with soldiers who eyed the two foreigners with suspicion. No longer an “express,” the

train lumbered slowly, making innumerable stops along the way. Although they were scheduled to arrive at 2:30p.m., it was after 6:00p.m. when Bernadette Farget, anxiously waiting at the station, finally saw them descend from the train. They were welcomed with open arms, for Bernadette and Stanislas had felt frightened and beleaguered, alone in their convent. Everything was in turmoil in Chieng Mai, communications were unpredictable or non-existent and Japanese troops were crowding into the city daily. Even in the midst of such confusion, they had done their best to maintain an atmosphere of normalcy by keeping the school in session and scheduling examinations at the regular time. Now with two more sisters to help them, they were hopeful that some regular order could be established.

No sooner had they begun final examinations, however, than the Ministry of Education sent word that all schools were to be closed by January 19, thus giving the nuns just three days to complete the semester. Japanese military presence in Thailand had made it a target of allied power. Bangkok had already suffered its first air raid and the atmosphere in Chieng Mai was sufficient indication that the city must be prepared for attack. Under such conditions it would be dangerous to keep schools in session. It was safer to have all children at home with their parents.

Even before school was closed the nuns, anticipating the possible requisition of the buildings, began moving things out of the boarders' dormitory. Their fears were far from groundless, for on January 23 the governor of Chieng Mai, along with several other Thai officers, came to officially request *Regina Coeli* for use as a military hospital. The nuns were forced to acquiesce but as Augustin wrote to Raphael, they were able to win some concessions: the original convent ("the blue house") and the new building would be exclusively reserved for the nuns. Three days later fifty invalids with ten doctors moved into the school with other soldiers quartered on the grounds. But these, as Stanislas later recorded, were quiet, disciplined men who caused no trouble, even removing their shoes before entering the school. In fact, they were there only a few months, leaving in mid-March with expressions of gratitude for the kindness of the nuns. Hardly had the Thai soldiers left, than the Japanese began their request to

use the school as a civilian hospital in case of bombings. There was no way the nuns could refuse for the Japanese, victorious everywhere, had even insisted that the Japanese flag be flown next to that of Thailand. "Willing or not we have to obey," the annalist recorded. "We install the civil hospital, hoping that our work will be useless."

Although the air raids in Chiang Mai were never as severe or as frequent as those in Bangkok, yet the city was not spared the daily anxiety caused by the allied bombers. As more Japanese soldiers poured into the north, the danger of air raids increased. "Planes fly over the city unceasingly," the annalist wrote. Often they flew over intent on other targets, but on one terrifying afternoon thirty bombs were dropped on the airport, killing three and wounding more than thirty. "We have to realize danger is at the door now," the annalist recorded. Under such conditions the daily question was how long they would be able to maintain their school.

At *Mater Dei* the nuns were in one way more fortunate for although Japanese officials persisted with their inquiries about the school, they had not issued a formal order of requisition. It was not the Japanese but the bombings of the allied planes—English and American—that were destroying the peace. From mid-January on, the area surrounding *Mater Dei* was constantly under attack. The masses of Japanese soldiers stationed nearby signaled the area as a "red zone"—a target for allied bombers. The air raid shelter, which had once been a source of amusement, was now all too frequently occupied. On January 26, vigil of the feast of St. Angela, the city experienced the first of the severe raids which shattered the railroad station and further disrupted communication. After a full day of teaching with all the additional burdens and anxieties that the war imposed, having to spend part of the night in the crowded and airless atmosphere of the shelter was more than they could endure. There were nights when weariness overcame fear and some of the sisters left the shelter and crept back into bed, despite the threat of bombs. At least, as Beatrice Hanson suggested, they would die comfortable!

The news—what news they received—was increasingly ominous. There seemed no end to Japanese victories. Singapore and Hong Kong had fallen and in March they learned of the fall of Rangoon, Soerabiya and the unconditional surrender of Java. It was a blow for all of them, for they had formed close ties with the Java province, but for the Dutch sisters it was a far more personal loss. Jeanne Marie van der Aalst and Benigna Biemans had worked in the Java mission for almost ten years. It was a home that they had only recently left. It was Marcelline de Nyjs, however, who suffered the most for she had been born in Sumatra in the Dutch East Indies and her family still lived there. Had they known then the horrors of the Japanese concentration camps in this conquered territory and the inhuman treatment meted out even to the sisters, the news would have been even more unendurable.

Although the schools were closed during that winter, time was not wasted. Under the intrepid leadership of Gemma Feeney *Mater Dei* continued to offer courses in English and mathematics and to organize a series of conferences on educational subjects given by the sisters. Although the air raids continued as frequently as before, in May the schools were given permission to open. When *Mater Dei* opened that month it was filled to overflowing: 535 students and 40 boarders! In addition, the government recognition which they had sought for years was finally accorded them. *Mater Dei* was granted full recognition by the Ministry of Education and its certificates acknowledged to be equivalent to those granted by government schools. At the same time, Sister Marie Joseph received her Baccalaureate degree from Chulalongkorn University, thus enabling her to assume the leadership of the school.

It must indeed have seemed ironic that such hard-won recognition was finally awarded at the very time when every day brought the possibility of destruction. *Mater Dei* was constructed entirely of wooden buildings and the nuns were well aware that if an incendiary bomb were to fall on the compound the results would be disastrous. They took what precautions they could, packing documents and other valuables into suitcases, ready for

immediate departure. In every corner, piles of sand and buckets of water were stored— small, futile efforts against the engulfing threat of fire.

But that fall the threat of fire was less immediate than the threat of water. Severe flooding, an ordinary problem in the northern area around Chiang Mai, had in the fall of 1942 reached tragic proportions. Part of the railroad was destroyed in the heavy water, bridges floated away, and in the lowland areas people and cattle alike were drowned. By October the flooding had reached south to Bangkok and panic seized the city as the water rose hour by hour. Many houses were of only a single story and the people had nowhere to escape to save themselves or their meager possessions. At *Mater Dei* the nuns worked tirelessly to bring all the contents of the kitchen, the storerooms, the students' dining room up to the second floor. Of those days the convent annalist wrote graphically:

Only water, water, dark brown water, everywhere! The water was rising. The garden had changed into a lake. The radio announced on October 2 that all the schools were to be closed. Parents came to take the boarders home. Silently and steadily the water rose. *Mater Dei* had several wooden buildings. First we connected them by school benches. When these were submerged, we used the tables from the children's dining room; when those had floated away, we had to look for a boat. The French Embassy kindly lent us one. *Mater Dei* compound had several deep canals, but at that time the canals couldn't be distinguished from the solid ground. Even the ramps of the bridges had disappeared.

It was several weeks before the water began to recede. Only then was the damage the floods had caused able to be assessed. For weeks the nuns cleaned and scraped, trying to free the floors and the furniture from the thick, malodorous coating of mud. There was, in addition, always the danger of disease for the water had swept away small animals and refuse and the decaying mass inevitably poisoned the atmosphere. "There is no sewerage properly so-called," Beatrice Hanson wrote in a later letter, "so

you can imagine what a flood would be like.” It was impossible to get proper foodstuffs and the nuns lived chiefly on rice and canned peas with the result that there was a rush of scurvy, caused by the lack of Vitamin C. Whooping cough, too, racked both children and nuns and stayed with them long after the flood had abated. In the garden they watched as their grove of mango trees began to wither, their leaves yellowing and falling to the ground. When it was clear that no amount of sunshine would restore them, they were cut down and new trees planted; but everyone knew that it would be ten years at least before they could hope for their precious fruit. “We lost thousands in the flood,” Beatrice continued, “10,000 [ticaux] to repair our plumbing and electric lights.”

Almost at the same time as the flood struck Bangkok, Ursula Savage received her formal permission to return to Chiang Mai, having convinced the authorities that there was in fact a country called Ireland, that it was distinct from England and had declared itself neutral. But even with this authorization in hand, it took weeks to get a ticket, for there was little space for ordinary civilians on trains crowded with soldiers. When finally the ticket was in her hand a landslide caused by the floods closed the tracks for several weeks. It was not until November 18 that Ursula finally arrived home.

At the end of December 1942, just a year after the war had begun, Beatrice Hanson was able to get word to her sister in California, assuring her that she was all right. The International Red Cross had set up a communications center which in the following years was the only available channel for information between countries. Of necessity such messages had to be limited and instructions were specific: “Message to be transmitted—not more than 25 words, family news of strictly personal character.” Such brevity seriously curtailed Beatrice’s ordinary style, but she was able to compose a remarkably comprehensive message of exactly 25 words: “Miraculous preservation. Praise the Lord! Don’t waste worry! All well both convents. Notify Big Mother [St. Jean Martin, then in the United States]. Christmas joys—New Year’s greetings to all. Love, Sister Bee.”

There was a tone of exaggerated optimism in the message—destined, of course, to allay the fears of worried family members. In fact, Bangkok was far from safe and in the north the nuns at *Regina Coeli* were encountering still further difficulties. In January 1943 orders were issued for all foreigners to leave the north by February 8. At once Ursula and Bernadette went to see the governor who kept them waiting for several hours. After a short meeting their request to stay in order to keep the school in session was met with a flat refusal. As they continued their pleas, however, the refusal was softened and they were told to “submit a written proposal” which would be sent to Bangkok for approval. Finally, they were told to return that afternoon for a meeting of all foreigners. The meeting was crowded with Chinese, Indians, Burmese, etc. It began well, with the governor thanking them warmly and graciously for all they had done for Thailand but then concluding with the unexpected order: “Now you have to go.” The only exceptions were those engaged by the government, those with big plantations, and those with a son in the military or police.

The following day the brothers and sisters returned and after a long wait were still given no answer. For the next three weeks they continued to wait, unsure of what their future would be. Finally at the very end of the month they learned from the radio that citizens of nations which were friends with Germany and Japan could remain. All teachers could remain through March when the present semester would end. Although this decision provided a breathing space, it was hardly a satisfactory conclusion. At the beginning of February, Raphael Vurnik, deeply concerned about the situation in Chiang Mai, braved the difficulties of travel and arrived at *Regina Coeli* to see if she could influence the decision. Although she received no immediate reply from the government, no doubt her tact and ability at negotiation influenced the final decision, for at the end of March the sisters received official permission to remain for another year—until January 1944.

In Bangkok there was no surcease from the constant air raids, but despite the danger Gemma continued classes with the Finishing School and the community had its annual retreat in April as usual. Even in peril there were

moments of celebration. A Japanese soldier, instructed by Genevieve Caulfield, received baptism in the *Mater Dei* chapel, as did a Jewish couple who had become close friends of the nuns. On May 18 Thérèse Mertens celebrated her Silver Jubilee. All four of the foundresses (Thérèse, Agnès, Raphael, Xavier) were still at *Mater Dei*, able to recount to the later members of the community those difficult beginnings. On October 24 Raphael celebrated her Silver Jubilee, with a solemn procession in the community and a larger celebration in the school, with the kindergarten presenting the drama of "Snow White." But the joy of the occasion was shattered when, without warning, it was discovered that Thérèse had cancer of the breast. The cancer was already far advanced for Thérèse, with her usual reticence, had hesitated to impose further suffering on the already-taxed community. In November she underwent radical surgery from which she made a surprisingly good recovery.

Word from Chieng Mai continued ominous. In September Italy had capitulated to the power of the Allies and suddenly Teresa Cito found herself an "enemy alien." At once three policemen arrived to arrest her but the nuns were able to win permission for her to be "imprisoned" at *Regina Coeli* with two policemen to guard her night and day. It seemed an exaggerated measure for the gentle, hard working Teresa and soon the surveillance diminished. Toward the end of November Chieng Mai suffered its most severe air raid. In late afternoon twenty-eight English planes bombed the station and the surrounding areas. "We count by tens the wounded and the dead," the annalist noted. "Lorry after lorry bring the dead to the crematorium." At the time Ursula and Augustin had gone to visit the doctor whose house was in the zone being shelled. Everything crashed around them—windowpanes, glasses, dishes, pieces of furniture and they narrowly escaped injury by crawling under a sofa.

The city was left in turmoil as bodies continued to be discovered—some still living under the heavy debris. This time there could be no hesitation: *Regina Coeli* opened its doors to the wounded. It was the poorest who were

brought to the makeshift hospital, those with no one to care for them: a little boy with no known family, a dying Chinese woman whose whole family had been killed. The nuns had access to the hospital, doing what they could to comfort the wounded, bringing soup or rice from their meager stores. "Everybody is evacuating," the annalist wrote, "as for us, we trust to Divine Providence and wait."

Along with the terror of the air raids was the difficulty of daily living. With reduced numbers of pupils and with the school frequently closed, the sisters' income was radically diminished. Stanislas, "a farmer's daughter," as she described herself, did what she could to keep a small vegetable garden. A monthly gift of rice came to them from the father of a pupil. Other benefactors provided fruit and eggs and an occasional piece of meat. It was far from a life of luxury but it was enough. "God was good to us," Stanislas wrote.

The following month it was Bangkok's turn to suffer destruction. On December 19 severe bombings struck the harbor and an adjacent cement factory, leaving the convent trembling with the impact. Five days later an even more severe air raid continued through the night. This time many non-military targets were hit. Three bombs fell on the College of the Assumption and one of Bangkok's hospitals was also struck. The incendiary bombs burned whole areas of stores and lit the horizon for miles. The nuns, powerless to help, stayed in chapel praying the rosary throughout the night. On the following day, December 24, the city was in desolation. "People had lost everything. No one knows what to do. Everyone is looking for a way out of the city," the convent annalist wrote. There was little celebration on Christmas day. The only mass was at 6:30a.m. and even that was sparsely attended for people were fearful of being out on the streets. Fortunately the raids subsided temporarily, giving people time to bury the dead and try to restore something of their homes. On December 29 all was quiet and in that relative calm the nuns began their yearly triduum.

The December air raids had made it clear to the nuns, however, that despite their air raid shelter and their drills for sudden evacuation of the school, it was increasingly dangerous to keep *Mater Dei* in session. A few years earlier the community had gone for a vacation to Hua Hin, a little fishing village about 150 miles south of Bangkok. It was a quiet simple place described glowingly by the annalist:

It had several miles of gently shelving beach of fine white sand where the bathing was quite safe....The surrounding land was a mixture of scrub and evergreen jungle, relieved here and there by stately bamboo clumps and plantations of palms. From these rose a fine range of hills which were magnificent when bathed in the reds and purples of a tropical sunset. Hua Hin was altogether lovely.

It was now to Hua Hin that Raphael began to look as a possible temporary site for *Mater Dei*.

On January 25 Gemma and Xavier traveled south to examine the possibility of renting several bungalows which had belonged to the American Protestant Mission. Although at first the Ministry of Education had been enthusiastic about such a move, especially since they had decreed that all schools would remain closed, they were indecisive about the location. Parents, however, were delighted and soon three bungalows were acquired for "*Mater Dei-by-the-Sea*." As an advance guard, Marie Joseph Dardarananda, Thérèse Mertens and Marjory Duke—a young postulant—with several boarders traveled to Hua Hin to organize the initial arrangements. Little by little some of the furniture from *Mater Dei* was loaded into strong Chinese boats docked at the canal that ran close to the school. With the generous help of friends, school benches, cupboards, tables—and even a piano—were stowed aboard and brought down along the gulf to Hua Hin where the advance guard, assisted by a group of Salesian seminarians, unloaded them and began the task of setting up classrooms and living quarters.

By May the school at Hua Hin had registered eighty pupils and fifteen boarders. Meanwhile, contrary to all previous orders, the Ministry of Education announced that all schools would open on May 17. Since some of the furniture as well as some of the teachers had already departed for Hua Hin, the four hundred pupils who registered that spring were a mixed blessing. The semester, however, was to be shortlived for on June 5 *Mater Dei*, which in the past had been miraculously spared, experienced the full fury of war.

By mid-morning of June 5 the rumbling of planes was constant but the nuns had become inured to the sound and, as the annalist noted, the morning seemed no different from many such mornings. It was a national holiday in honor of Lord Buddha and only about twenty of their pupils had come to school. Some of the nuns were busy correcting papers, a few were in chapel where for the last six months they had had daily exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. By 11:30, however, the bombing had moved much closer with as many as forty-seven flying fortresses raining down bombs, sometimes twelve at a time. At once, three of the nuns took the children to the shelter just as Beatrice was entering chapel for her period of adoration. "By this time," she wrote later to her sister, "planes were rushing overhead, bombs were bursting on all sides and there was the added din of anti-aircraft all too near to us." But still no siren.

At a few minutes to 12:00 as Raphael was making a decision to remove the Blessed Sacrament to the shelter, the world around them shook and heaved. "A moment or two and then an explosion and a crash," Beatrice continued. "When I opened my eyes I saw the roof open and the astonished heavens looking down to see what had happened. What had happened? The road outside the Finishing Course got the bomb and we got the road. I was lying in the midst of a mess of mud, rocks, tin, tiles and wood. A piece of 2x4 with nails protruding lay at my head. The blast had momentarily stunned me. I was covered with mud from head to foot, but I was still in one piece." At once Raphael took the monstrance containing the Blessed Sacrament and accompanied by Beatrice and Charles made her way to the shelter. For the next two hours as the raid continued undiminished, they

prayed before the Blessed Sacrament with Raphael holding the monstrance steady as the bombs crashed around them

Finally about 2:00p.m. there was a lull and the nuns went out to assess the damage. What they saw was almost impossible to believe. There was wreckage everywhere. The roof of the Finishing Course was entirely gone. Half the kitchen roof was gone. The large metal pots were twisted into unrecognizable shapes. Bowls and dishes were full of mud, glasses broken, furniture in pieces. The ceiling of the boarders' dormitory was hanging in threads. The iron bedsteads were "twisted like paper." In the nuns' dormitory the ceiling was full of enormous holes. The armoires were thrown about, their locks broken, their doors open and their contents smashed into little pieces. The roof of the new kindergarten of which they were so proud was completely destroyed and there were large holes in the floors of the classrooms. The statue of St. Angela had lost a hand and the statue of the little girl at her side had been decapitated, but by some miracle the statue of Our Lady of Lourdes was still intact.

At 4:30 their chaplain arrived and they had Benediction—a heartfelt service of gratitude to God that their lives had been spared. The *Te Deum* had rarely been sung with more feeling. There was no hope of supper that evening for they had neither food nor the means to prepare it, but in late afternoon a knock came and with it a complete dinner—from soup to desert—as the annalist noted, the gift of a Chinese family whose daughters attended *Mater Dei*. There was little sleep that night for in addition to the universal destruction on every side, they were visited with torrential rain that poured through the empty spaces where the roof had been. The next day they were inundated with crowds—partly friends and former pupils offering what help they could, partly curious spectators gazing on the ruin of the beautiful school. *Mater Dei* had not suffered alone; all of Bangkok had suffered ruinously. This time it was not only the destruction of property but of human life and, the annalist wrote, "there were not enough vehicles to bring the poor broken bodies to the hospital."

It was no surprise when the Ministry of Education declared all schools closed until the end of August, but for the nuns this did not mean an end but only a new beginning. The branch school at Hua Hin was already in session and for the next week the nuns, in addition to trying to bring some order to the chaos at *Mater Dei*, struggled with moving and packing everything that would be needed at *Mater Dei-by-the-Sea*. Once again all the available school furniture was loaded on to boats to make their slow way by water down the coast. On June 14, just ten days after the disastrous air raid, nine sisters set off for Hua Hin: Beatrice Hanson, Marcelline van Nijs, Theophane Westerman, Charles Roberts, Deodata Hocesvar, Angela Tan, Jeanne Terrace, Jeanne Marie van der Aalst, Benigna Biemens. Five would remain at *Mater Dei* at least for the time being: St. Jean Ruegg, Xavier Pirc, Gemma Feeney, Agnès Delattre and, of course, Raphael Vurnik as superior..

Although for most it would be a temporary parting, for Agnes Delattre, it was to be a permanent farewell. Not long before, Agnès had been diagnosed with cancer. Like Thérèse Mertens, Agnes had said nothing about her illness until it was dangerously advanced. She, too, had had radical surgery, but unlike Therese she did not rally. The treatments alleviated a little of her suffering but did nothing to cure her. By the middle of June the sisters realized that she probably had only a short time to live. There was little hope that those going to Hua Hin would ever see her again. "No need to say how deeply the sacrifice was felt," the annalist wrote, as they prepared for the separation.

Four autos were to take the nine sisters to the station—but it was not only the sisters who crowded into the cars, but boxes, baskets, valises, even a few camp beds which were squeezed and compressed into the available space. "It was 'wonderful to see how everything fit!'" wrote the annalist triumphantly. A final farewell at the station—almost destroyed by the bombing—and then the frantic struggle to get everything moved from the autos and stowed aboard the crowded train. The final whistle and the train moved slowly out of the devastated station. They had begun the southward journey to a new adventure.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“THE WEEK OF THE PASSION”

The weary group of sisters who arrived at Hua Hin on June 10 found a Hua Hin transformed. The tranquil, solitary spot where they had spent a restful vacation a few years earlier had become a bustling school with fifty boarders and as many as 150 children of all ages. In addition to the boarders—many of whom came from *Mater Dei*—were a number of Thai teachers who had accompanied them from Bangkok. Last but not least were the two “babies”—two little girls under the age of two—abandoned by their mothers and brought into the loving care of Jeanne Marie van der Aalst. It was a sizeable group to provide for. Following the arrival of the first group in May, a total of six bungalows had been acquired—space desperately needed for a school which was becoming far larger than originally anticipated.

Thérèse Mertens, with her skill at establishing order, had already allotted space to the various groups. Each bungalow had been given a title of Our Lady and been assigned a special purpose:

Regina Pacis: Superior's office

Mater Dei: the Community

Stella Matutina: school section

Stella Maris: the boarding section

Regina Angelorum: children's camp

La Visitation: Mistresses house

Toward the end of June Raphael made the arduous trip from Bangkok to appraise the situation at Hua Hin, to make suggestions about the best use of space and personnel, and to give the sisters news of those remaining in Bangkok. Some effort was being made, she explained, to repair some of the worst damage but it was very difficult to find workers and even more difficult to find material they could afford. Living expenses had soared and building materials were being requisitioned to repair the damage done to public spaces and utilities. Although the nuns had not been able to obtain tiles to repair the roofs, they had compromised on heavy thatch which at least kept out the rains.

Such material concerns were trivial, however, compared to the heart-heavy news about Agnès. Although they had known since her diagnosis in May that she could not be cured, yet seeing her suffering without being able to alleviate it wrung their hearts. From the beginning of her mission life Agnès had never asked anything for herself. All her concerns had been for the people she served—particularly for the poor school at Calvary where she had always dreamed of starting an orphanage. “It would be difficult to find a more detached soul than our Mother Agnès,” one of the sisters wrote. Even now there were no complaints, but Raphael acknowledged that she suffered unremittingly; her whole body was so swollen that there was no position which brought her comfort.

On June 26 Agnès wrote one of her last letters to her younger sister in Normandy:

Since I still have enough strength to hold a pencil, I'm going to come to give you some news....My life is slipping away; I can feel it but I'm not anxious. I say “Fiat” to whatever Jesus wishes. All my trust is in him and in our Heavenly

Mother....You are wondering if my pains are very sharp. I am so swollen from my feet up to my chest that I can't lie down very well. My back and my sides are the most painful part so that I am sometimes in a chaise longue or an armchair. At night I get an injection which helps me sleep....What a grace it is to know that one is going to die. [I offer] a *Magnificat* for all the graces I have received. I have tried to make the most of everything. Please pray for me. I count on you to provide some little word of comfort to the family....These letters will arrive very late, I know, probably after the war....

That same day Raphael left Hua Hin and arrived in Bangkok in time to hear the doctor's advice. From then on the four remaining sisters divided their days and nights so that Agnès would always have someone at her bedside. On July 7 she added a note to the letter she had already written to her sister; but by this time she was too weak to write herself and the note was dictated to one of the sisters who attended her. "Good morning, Little Sister, our Master still hasn't sent for me; he has left me on my cross. Fiat and abandonment always....How much I think of our dear Normandy! And of our dear brothers and sisters—and all of you. Fortunately the one who has the care of us is our Heavenly Father. I entrust you all to Him."

It was Agnès' final word. After two more weeks of suffering she died in St. Louis Hospital on July 24. She was just fifty-four years old and had been on the mission twenty years. She was the oldest of the four foundresses and probably the most practical. When at the beginning they had been responsible for preparing meals for the priests, washing and ironing the altar linens, as well as a thousand other chores, it had been Agnès who without complaint had done her best to do what had to be done despite her inexperience. The poor children of Calvary had won her heart and when the government ordered Chinese schools closed, Agnès became an army of one fighting to keep Calvary open. She often worked without help, sacrificing not only her energy but even the community life which she valued so dearly in order to remain where she felt she was needed.

"Delattre saintly death 24 July 1944 cancer," read the wire that Raphael, through the instrumentality of the International Red Cross, was able to send to St. Jean Martin in the United States.

It was their first death in Bangkok. Both Mary Sheehan and Clotilde Angela McCan had died and been buried in Chiang Mai. When the funeral was over and the four remaining sisters returned to the damaged buildings of *Mater Dei*, they found that their loss had drained their energies. Agnès with her quiet endurance had heartened them more than they had realized. Now as they listened to the thundering noise of the air raids and saw the needless damage being wreaked all around them, they must have wondered if there was a future for them in Bangkok.

Although *Mater Dei* was never hit again as it had been in June, the air raids continued with increasing force and frequency. Since there was no possibility of opening the school, it seemed sensible to close the property completely and move to Hua Hin. They hesitated, however, fearful that once they were gone the Japanese would move into the compound since *Mater Dei* would be a very valuable location for them. When Raphael went to discuss the issue with Bishop Perros, however, he assured them that they would be under the protection of the Mission and that he himself would visit the property every week. In addition, two Thai policemen—possibly those who had been "guarding" the alien sisters—had charge of protecting the compound from intruders. Their regular gardener would also remain on the property as well as their faithful watchman, Noor Alam, an Afghanistan Muslim, devoted to the sisters. In a way he had accepted the sisters as his family and their departure touched him deeply. A profoundly religious man, he saw the threat of death all around him and as the nuns prepared to leave, Noor Alam wrote them a letter—a final testament should they not meet again.

Dear Mother Superior and all the Sisters,

You are all going away and I am left all alone here, not knowing what might happen to me in this troublesome time.

I have been working for you for sixteen years, so forgive me all the faults I have committed during this period. Some of my misdeeds you might not know, but pardon me all of them. In case of accidental death by bombing, I may have to give an account to God. With your forgiveness, I may give up my soul happily.

Your obedient servant

Noor Alam, the Night Watchman

Part of September and into October was spent arranging for their departure from *Mater Dei*. There was more furniture to be packed for removal to Hua Hin, there were the hundreds of small items that had to be carefully stored away. Arrangements had to be made for the boats that would bring the heavy items—desks, benches, tables—to Hua Hin. The Ministry of Education did what they could to help and although at the beginning of the war all the “alien” sisters had been placed under house arrest, the government now raised no difficulty in changing their residence from Bangkok to Hua Hin.

The nuns were ready to leave on October 14 but the boats did not arrive and it was not until October 25 that they were finally able to stow all the luggage. Three days later they left *Mater Dei*. “The day of the great sacrifice has arrived,” the annalist wrote. “The heavens seemed sad along with us for a torrential rain fell. Up at 4:00a.m. for Mass at 5:00a.m.” Cars belonging to friends and former pupils arrived to take them to the station where more pupils awaited to say goodbye. As usual the train was crowded but the nuns were able to have a compartment to themselves for most of the trip. Instead of the usual few stops there were thirty stops before the train finally pulled into the station at Hua Hin at 5:30 that evening.

Thus life settled in at *Mater-Dei-by-the-Sea*. Occasionally news trickled in from Bangkok. Bombings continued unabated, sometimes lasting for as long as six hours; but so far *Mater Dei* was safe. Their greatest concern was for *Regina Coeli*. No news came to them from the north. Not even the

telegraph lines were available since they had been commandeered by the Japanese for military purposes. Although Hua Hin was far from the areas of conflict, even in this secluded spot they experienced the dread of war. Often squadrons of bombers passed over them and sometimes at night in the distance they could see the sky red with fire. "Where are they going? What will happen tomorrow? Or the day after tomorrow?" the annalist wrote anxiously, for there seemed no abatement in the war and no end to Japanese victories. Preparations for Christmas were very simple that year for they had very little to give as presents even to their students. But Christmas was not without its joys because on Christmas Eve they celebrated four baptisms: two of their boarders, the daughter of their carpenter, and a woman who had worked in Miss Caulfields's school.

At the beginning of the New Year—1945—they had their first health crisis. There was no medical assistance anywhere in the area of Hua Hin but so far they had been fortunate for neither their pupils nor the sisters had been seriously ill. In January, however, they were faced with a mortal illness. Some time earlier, at the request of the authorities in Bangkok, they had accepted into the community of Hua Hin, a Mrs. Jamison, a Scotch woman whose husband was interned in the camp at Bangkok. Mrs. Jamison was a diabetic and the rigors of the camp without adequate food or medication was causing severe health problems. With unusual concern the camp commandant suggested that she be put in a less harsh atmosphere. Although a Presbyterian, Mrs. Jamison grew fond of the nuns and the gracious atmosphere of Hua Hin—so different from the hostile atmosphere of the camp—led to an apparent improvement in her health. She enjoyed the quiet and the sea air and her daily walks.

Then suddenly one day she was too sick to rise from her bed and within hours her health had deteriorated dramatically. Whether or not the nuns understood the nature of her illness it is hard to say; but Gemma, who had had some nursing experience, quickly realized that this was an emergency. With no doctor available, she sought the closest thing she could think of to medical help: she went off to find the local dentist. But when he arrived

with his wife, he shook his head. He had no experience in medicine and did not want to assume the responsibility of making any decisions. He informed them, however, that there was a Thai doctor in the area. Once again the intrepid Gemma took off on a pedicab and brought back the doctor. Although he offered no diagnosis, he gave Mrs. Jamison an injection that calmed her and assured the sisters that she would probably be better in the morning.

The morning, however, found her unconscious. Meanwhile they learned that there was an old English doctor at Hua Hin and once again Gemma went off to find him. He, too, shook his head negatively. He was under house arrest and could go nowhere without the authorization of the police. In addition, he had no medicine of any kind. He agreed, however, that if the sisters could get permission he would come and see if he could diagnose the trouble. When he arrived, he found the diagnosis easy: Mrs. Jamison was in a diabetic coma. Without medication there was nothing that could be done.

Mrs. Jamison was already close to death. She lingered only a short time—just long enough for conditional baptism. She was buried that same day, in the Catholic cemetery at Hua Hin with the Salesian Fathers providing full Catholic rites for her.

A few days later a friend of the sisters was going to Bangkok and was able to bring word to Mr. Jamison of his wife's death. Gemma had put her few jewels in a little box and fixed a lock of her hair with a green ribbon—her favorite color—and this, too, with an account of his wife's death, was brought to Mr. Jamison.

By mid-March the official semester was over but only fifteen of their boarders left for vacation. Others stayed until after Easter on April 2 and then tried to find places on the trains which were so crowded that people were even riding on the roof. That same week Mother Raphael received word that startled them all. Their watchman at *Mater Dei* came with the news that within a few days the Japanese were going to occupy their

property. Raphael must go at once! But how was she to go? It was impossible to get a place on the train and the little boat that still sailed occasionally to Bangkok could not be counted on. Not far from the school, however, was one of the royal palaces and several times the nuns had had contact with both the young king and his mother. Now, at the moment of need, one of the princes offered his car to drive Raphael to the station at Petchaburi, a little town north of Hua Hin and about sixty miles southwest of Bangkok. From there, it was hoped, she would be able to get the train to Bangkok.

The next morning at 6:30 Raphael set out for Petchaburi, accompanied by Marie Joseph. Even with such help, travel was far from direct and they spent the night with the Salesians at Bang Nok Kuik. It was a providential delay, however, for they were able to see the Salesian Provincial and ask his advice about ceding *Mater Dei* to the Japanese. He advised that they agree for, he warned, if you refuse they will probably exert pressure which will be more difficult for you in the end. On the evening of April 7 they arrived at the Bangkok station and were met by their watchman who informed them that Bishop Perros had already agreed to give *Mater Dei* to the Japanese. Stunned by this unexpected news, Raphael went at once to the bishopric to see Perros personally. She was shocked that he would have taken such a step without consulting or at least informing her. When she arrived, however, he showed her the telegram he had prepared asking her to come to Bangkok at once, but, he explained, there had been no means to send it for all the communication lines were cut.

In a calmer mood, she was able to listen to his explanation. He had been under great pressure, he explained, to make over Mission property to the Japanese. They particularly wanted *Mater Dei* and Assumption which was under the auspices of the Brothers of St. Gabriel. The latter he considered the very heart of the Mission because it included the church, the bishopric, the procurator's office. Thus, in order to save Assumption as well as St. Joseph's (the school run by the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres), Perros had bargained with the Japanese by offering them *Mater Dei*. Raphael found his decision bewildering: was *Mater Dei* to be sacrificed in such a fashion?

Then as she tried to stem her resentment, she remembered a letter she had received from the provincial of Java, at the beginning of the war: "Should you be asked to use *Mater Dei* as a field hospital, do not hesitate," Ildefonse had advised. The message was clear: in such crucial times, great sacrifices must be made. Now, as the bishop explained it, they were being asked to sacrifice *Mater Dei* to save the mission. In this light there was only one response possible. She must agree with the bishop's decision.

That evening when Raphael and Marie Joseph finally arrived at *Mater Dei* they found two Japanese soldiers ready to move furniture from the house. On this Raphael stood her ground: no definite arrangements had been made; they must wait. The following day, Sunday, they had Mass in their little chapel. On Monday they met again at the bishopric with Japanese authorities present; but a definitive arrangement was postponed until the following day when they would meet again at *Mater Dei*. This time terms of the lease were discussed and Raphael asked for 7,000 ticaux a month for a period of six months, with payments made every three months. The Japanese indicated that they found this very high but said they would discuss it with their superiors. For the next three days, April 11 until April 14, Raphael and Marie Joseph stayed on, waiting for the final documents. While they waited, they dismantled the few things left at *Mater Dei*, selling the cupboards and the heavy chapel benches and saving a few small objects for Calvary. Finally, early on Saturday morning, just a week after their arrival, Bishop Perros himself brought the official document, already signed by both the Japanese and the bishop.*

The nuns had only a few minutes to absorb the meaning of this final act for at once the Japanese troops began to enter the property and prepare their own installation. Of that difficult hour the annalist wrote:

Our Mother hardly had the contract in her hand than the troops entered the property to begin their own installation.

* See Appendix E for full text of the contract.

With a broken heart and a crushed spirit, but still adoring the ways of Divine Providence, Mother Raphael went to chapel to say the *Magnificat*. The week which had just passed could rightly be called the week of the Passion for our beloved *Mater Dei*. Yet by this generous act of charity, there blossomed in our tears and in the bitterness of our sacrifice a feeling of faith and consolation for having sacrificed everything for the Mission to which we have contributed and worked for twenty years.

Final arrangements were made with the Japanese. The large crucifix that had been in the refectory was brought into the chapel. The statue of St. Thérèse—too heavy to move—was left in its place. The Japanese lieutenant seemed to understand the significance of this sacred space and assured Raphael that it would not be used. The Salesian Sisters had generously offered to store some remaining books and the Japanese asked for the use of some chairs and tables. In the midst of the negotiations they heard the air raid warning and within minutes the bombers had dropped their load on the city's source of electricity and water. The city was in turmoil and it was evening before Raphael and Marie Joseph found a means of getting to Calvary where they were to spend the night. A pedicab took them through a deserted city, a city mourning in the silence of death. Had they looked back, they would have seen nothing for *Mater Dei* was enveloped in darkness.

On Monday, April 16, Raphael had one more task to complete. Although she had willingly sacrificed *Mater Dei* to the good of the Mission, there was still a matter of justice she wished to discuss with Perros. At that time the Ursulines owed a debt of some 22,350 ticaux to the Mission. Raphael now proposed that in the event that *Mater Dei* be severely bombed, the Mission would remit the remainder of the debt. Perros, although agreeing with her request, pointed out that he would have to discuss the matter with his council. The council, however, was less generous. In the Act drawn up that same day, it was stipulated that should the Ursulines receive the second payment (21,000 ticaux) from the Japanese, they would use that sum to pay

their debt to the Mission. But should *Mater Dei* be destroyed following this, the council was not willing to make any provision. It was less than Raphael had requested but, once again, there was little she could do but accede to the council's decision.

The following morning with heavy hearts Raphael and Marie Joseph began their long and unpredictable journey back to Hua Hin. Bangkok was still without water and electricity and it was close to impossible to find any means of transportation. That afternoon they accepted the hospitality of the Salesian Sisters who had also agreed to store some boxes from *Mater Dei* for the duration of the war. The quiet of the afternoon, however, was disrupted by the thunder of seventy-four bombers flying only a hundred meters over their heads. At once they ran toward a shelter which had been created in the cemetery but as they went Raphael suddenly veered off to hide in a coconut grove. It was clearly an act of inspiration, for only a few seconds later a bomb was dropped on the very spot where they would have been.

For the moment they were safe but as they waited, the bombing grew more severe and in desperation the Salesian Provincial gestured for them to jump into the nearby canal. Obediently they leaped in and from there "with water up to their knees" they watched the deadly procession of bombers on their way to wreak more havoc on Bangkok. Soaking wet and covered in mud they scrambled awkwardly out of the canal but this inconvenience was nothing compared with the danger they had avoided.

On April 17 they left for Ratburi, hoping from there to be able to get to Petchaburi and then on to Hua Hin. But upon arriving at Petchaburi they learned that no trains were running because of the bombardment the evening before. It was growing toward evening and all their efforts to find some means of transportation were futile. Finally, with no other option, they spent the night in a house that had belonged to some Protestant missionaries. The next morning they began their fruitless search again but as they walked through the city the air raid sirens began their warning. The

annalist, no doubt hearing the story from Mother Raphael, painted a graphic image of those moments of terror:

The race began: Thais, Chinese, Indians, Laotians all running in the same direction without knowing where they were going but with only a single thought—to avoid the bombs! And in the middle of this crowd alongside Bonzas in their yellow robes were two Ursulines, garbed in black, rushing headlong, for the bombers were on top of them and the noise of the planes did nothing to inspire confidence!

Once more, however, they were protected. The bombers passed over without destruction.

Finally during the day they negotiated with a Danish man who also wanted to get to Hua Hin. That evening about 8:30 they started out with the promise that they would be at Hua Hin within three hours. But about 10:00p.m. the car suddenly stopped and no effort on the part of the chauffeur could get it moving. The men tried to push it in order to activate the motor—but in vain. Their anxiety was increased by the fact that they were not far from the Japanese airfield and as they waited they could hear the whir of the engines as the planes took off. They could do nothing but wait in total darkness, on a lonely road, drenched with a soft spring rain until in the first morning light a passing bus picked them up.

At 8:30—just twelve hours after they had left Petchaburi—they arrived at *Mater Dei-by-the-Sea*. “What a picture!” wrote the annalist. They were soaking wet from head to foot; their starched headdresses were limp and shapeless, their shoes dripping and drenched with mud. But they were safe and at home. As they had breakfast together Raphael told them “not without tears, the week of agony for our beloved *Mater Dei*. Yet through our tears we could say, ‘Fiat....Magnificat!’”

The following day, April 22, the community began its annual retreat and when it ended on May 1 they found for the first time in three-and-a-half

years a sign of hope that the war might end. Mussolini had been shot and Italy had laid down its arms. Rangoon, on the southern border of Burma and very close to Thailand, had fallen to the English. Most important of all, they learned that Berlin was in the hands of the Allies. They lived in a new spirit of hope when on May 6 they celebrated the first anniversary of *Mater Dei-by-the-Sea*. They had to wait only a few days longer before they received the news they had been praying for: Germany had surrendered; the war in Europe was at an end. The Mass they celebrated for the feast of Pentecost was filled with a spirit of joy and gratitude. It was too soon for them to predict what would happen in the East, but their spirits soared with the knowledge that Europe, at least, would be free from the terror of war.

School began on May 25 with ninety-nine pupils registered. The following week the feast of Corpus Christi was celebrated with an outdoor procession. "The first time for such a procession in this little corner of Thailand," the annalist noted proudly. Day by day they listened for further war news—for some sign that the East, too, might soon be released from the threat of death and destruction. On August 11 there was a rumor that Japan had surrendered and at once they went to chapel to sing the *Magnificat*. But, alas, the next rumor was that nothing was actually settled. "We wait in anguish," the annalist wrote. For another three days they lived in anticipation until finally "the great news was announced: the unconditional surrender of Japan. Peace in the Far East."

Shortly after the announcement of peace, fifty of the Japanese soldiers stationed in the area came to ask if they could stay in the school for a few days. Raphael explained that since school was still in session this would be very difficult, but she offered them one of the empty bungalows which they accepted gratefully. There they stayed for four days before being taken back to Bangkok to be disarmed. During their stay they asked if they could listen to the radio and there they sat, hearing over the BBC the news of their country's surrender—and the even more painful news of the total destruction resulting from the atom bomb dropped by the Americans on Hiroshima.

The sisters, despite their own joy at the end of the war, could not but feel compassion for these young men who had fought in loyalty and obedience to their country and now had to face defeat and terrible personal loss. "Poor men!" the annalist wrote. "Tired, discouraged, humiliated. Tears ran down their faces at the cruel news of Hiroshima....They were no more enemies but suffering brothers." Raphael with her extraordinary sense of compassion invited some of them to "tea," sharing the few provisions the nuns had—some dishes of fruit and pastry and fried bananas which had been fixed for the boarders. "You could see the joy on their faces although they could say nothing since they spoke only Japanese."

With the news of peace, many of the refugee families began moving back to Bangkok and many of their boarders left to rejoin their families. On August 23 they received a letter from Bishop Perros saying that the Japanese were already preparing to leave *Mater Dei* and expected to be out by September 15. It was decided, however, to keep the school at Hua Hin in session at least for a while and four sisters were asked to remain: Marcelline, Marie Joseph, Gemma, and Jeanne Marie. At once the onerous task of packing began. But this time it was very different. When they had first come in May 1944 it was with no clear idea of what they could accomplish in Hua Hin and a terrible fear that they might never be able to return to *Mater Dei*. The fear had been heightened in June with the devastating air raid that had destroyed parts of the school. Now, however, their fears were allayed: the world was at peace and they were going home!

On September 1 they had finished packing the first two sail boats with the heavy furniture which the Salesian seminarians helped them carry from the school and stow away on the ship. It would take at least a week for the boats to reach Bangkok, but there was no need for haste since the Japanese would still occupy *Mater Dei* until the middle of the month. On September 3 Raphael and Gemma set out for Bangkok, but transportation was still no easy matter. Their first plan was to travel via a little fishing boat anchored in front of their school. It had a small cabin which would protect them from the sun but when they examined it more closely, they saw that the cabin was so small that they would have to crawl in on their hands and

knees and so “fishy” that they could not endure the smell. Their second effort was to try to get tickets on a prisoner train which was supposed to leave Hua Hin that afternoon but by 8:00p.m. no train had arrived and they were about to give up when they heard that there was a motor boat in the harbor, bound for Bangkok. By 8:30 they were on board and in Bangkok by the following morning.

Six days later one of their workmen at *Mater Dei* arrived at Hua Hin with a letter from Mother Raphael—the postal service had not yet been reactivated. All four sail boats had arrived safely, she wrote, and all the heavy furniture had been taken from the ships by thirty Japanese soldiers who loaded it on their trucks and brought it to *Mater Dei*. The Japanese had left on September 8—a week before they had expected—having paid their full rent for the six months they had occupied *Mater Dei*. As they departed an officer handed a letter to the watchman:

To dear guard: .

We have finished our removal. Thanks for your kindness.
My head [superior officer] told me to remember us to your
Mother [Sister Raphael]. We return these keys to the rooms,

Lieutenant Sugura

Thus an era ended. All that they had dreaded had not happened. *Mater Dei* had not been bombed again. The Japanese had taken remarkably good care of the property, even polishing the tables before their departure and leaving for the use of the sisters some sacks of rice and a stack of wood, very precious for repairs. They had honored the sacred space of the chapel. And the rent they had paid had enabled the nuns to pay their debt to the Mission. On September 15 at *Mater Dei* Bangkok and at *Mater Dei-by-the-Sea* a mass was celebrated in honor of Our Lady of Sorrows and to thank God for his providential care during those difficult years. It was a joyful day in which they shared memories of all they had endured and all they had been spared.

Although no one yet had been able to travel north to visit Chieng Mai, yet some communication had been restored and the nuns knew, at least, that the four sisters at *Regina Coeli* had weathered the war without serious consequences. Although they had never suffered the massive bombardments of Bangkok yet they had experienced their own suffering. During most of the war their isolation seemed complete. There was little opportunity for them to hear from the sisters at *Mater Dei* or to send them word of their own situation. They lived in uncertainty. Close to the Burma border they heard the stories of Japanese atrocities brought back into Siam by terrified refugees. Japanese soldiers were everywhere in the city, and although the sisters had not suffered directly, they lived in an atmosphere of menace. They did their best to keep the school in session, but it was always uncertain and the reduced number of pupils curtailed their income dramatically.

Now, at last, their isolation was at an end and the two communities looked forward to a day when they would be reunited. But that day was still in the future; there would be time then to share memories, to renew bonds of affection made stronger by separation. Now, however, there was work to be done. How better to give thanks to God for his protection than to continue the work he had given them to do. With little time for rest—and without hesitation—the nuns began their preparation for the fall semester. The official announcement had already been made:

***Mater Dei* Institute under the direction of the Ursuline nuns**

Will open its doors once again on October 1, 1945

EPILOGUE

When in October of 1945--just months after the end of the war--*Mater Dei* was reopened, there were twenty-one Ursulines in Thailand, of whom only two were native Thais--Marie Joseph (Bunprachuk) Dardarananda and Angèle de Notre-Dame Tan. At present (1998) the province numbers forty-five professed religious: 6 Americans, 1 Canadian, 3 Dutch, 3 French, 1 Slovak, 1 Slovene, 30 Thais. The numbers speak eloquently of the direction of the province.

The shift in personnel has also, perhaps, been influential in the diversification of ministries. Although the primary work remains education--as it has always been--there is now much greater outreach to varied groups of people. Presently the Ursulines are responsible for five formal schools: two extending from kindergarten through grade 12; two extending from kindergarten through grade 9; one extending from grade 1 through grade 9. These schools have a faculty of 29 Ursulines and 468 secular teachers, both men and women, Catholic and Buddhist. The total student enrolment is 8,657.

In addition, these formal schools are involved in a "Sister-School" project. Presently there are ten Ursuline sponsored schools in the remote mountainous areas of the north. Since this territory is considered dangerous, the schools are under the control of the Border Police rather than the Department of Education. These schools extend only through the sixth grade and enroll some 1,600 children. Since the poverty in these areas

is extreme, a year-long campaign is carried on by both parents and students of *Mater Dei* to provide school uniforms, books, and other necessities. A group of doctors--parents of *Mater Dei* students--visit this area annually to examine and treat the children in these remote areas.

Also in an effort to meet the needs of these people there is a specific program designed for the development of the human resources of the Karen and other tribal people in northern Thailand. For the last thirty years the Thai province has conducted two hostels for tribal girls coming from the Catholic Mission stations in mountain villages. This is a three-to-four-year program in which the girls follow formal studies or learn income-generating skills. Presently there are in residence some 80 girls between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, representing five different tribes.

Individual ministries include pastoral work in rural villages and with Karen refugees from the Thai-Burmese border, retreat work and spiritual direction, pastoral and human development in the north and executive work with the South East Asian Major Superiors of Religious.

That all of this spirited evangelization has sprung from that tiny nucleus of four Ursulines--young, dedicated, zealous but woefully ignorant--who landed at nightfall on the wharves of Bangkok is surely more dramatic than any fiction writer could conceive. Yet the cries of those early days still ring in our ears. Thérèse Mertens anguished letters to Rome: "Please help us; it is more than we can manage." Mother Angèle de Notre-Dame's equally anguished doubts about closing the mission entirely. The never-ending worries about debts. The shadow of sickness which stalked them from their first month.

More than once they were on the very edge of destruction. Yet, apparently, there was never a thought on the part of the missionaries of abandoning the mission. It was not that they were unaware of their perils; their letters are clear indication that they were far from whistling in the dark. The abyss, they knew, was often dangerously close. But there was another spirit, stronger than fear, almost stronger than fact. Bernard Mancel, that

incomparable missionary, explained it perhaps in the only way possible: "We live suspended in the hand of the Divine Goodness...Blind trust....We live in a miracle..." Even in their bleakest moments these early women seemed never to doubt God's infinite power and compassionate love. It was a faith which permeated everything--like a tropical rain which turned streams into rivers and deserts into orchards. As we reflect on those first twenty years of Ursuline presence in Thailand we can hear through it all, like a leit-motiv, those words of St. Paul: God who raised Jesus from the dead can do infinitely more than we can imagine or desire.

APPENDIX A

Letter from René Perros, Vicar Apostolic of Siam, to Joseph Fréri, Head of the Propagation of the Faith in North America, August 17, 1923

Today I am coming to ask your help in a matter of great consequence for the future of our Mission. Here in Siam at the present moment the instruction of the young is high on the agenda. The state, the Catholic Mission, the Protestants, private individuals rival each other's zeal and secondary schools as well as primary are growing in attendance. Our dear Brothers of St. Gabriel have three colleges. The two located in Bangkok have more than 2,000 pupils; the third which is out in the province has about 150 and this number is on the increase. As for the girls, the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres have three secondary schools in Bangkok, numbering more than a thousand pupils-boarders as well as day students. But even these schools are far from sufficient in a city extending for more than twelve kilometres and numbering more than 650,000 inhabitants. North of the city is a large area which is just now being developed thanks to a new palace which the king has constructed there and to the princely residences which are growing up in the neighborhood. We have there the Church of St. Francis Xavier, next to which the Brothers have built a college for boys to which the students are flocking. It is imperative that an analogous institution be founded for girls. It is through these schools that we will be able to reach the upper class of society which is very influential here.

The moment is most favorable for us. We are deeply appreciated and many parents have asked us to establish a secondary school where they can send their daughters. There is still no such establishment in this area but this will not last long and if we do not take the initiative a considerable portion of the young will slip away from us.

Monsignor Lecroart who last May made his apostolic visit to our Mission strongly endorses this plan and insists that we fill the place which is still free, for if we do not, it will soon be taken by the Protestants and the pagans.

To my repeated insistence, the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres have replied that it is impossible for them to embark upon a new foundation for years to come because of a lack of personnel. I then wrote to the Dames de St. Maur who have many houses in the diocese of Malacca to which some children from here have gone for their education (at the moment there are some twenty children—both Christians and pagans—from Bangkok in the convent schools in Penang and Singapore) despite the considerable expense of the voyage. These ladies have also replied that to their great regret they are not able to accept my proposition because of lack of subjects. During the past year I have searched everywhere in France and the reply has been the same everywhere. Impossible because of lack of subjects!

In this impasse I have only once recourse: to find in America what Europe is unable to provide. And so I come to beg your generosity and your zeal to help our Mission. We must have religious with a good knowledge of English to teach this language which is very popular in use here. This is a very important point and will not present any difficulty for religious coming from America while it is a very real problem for the sisters coming from France. It is also important for them to be able to teach French but, if necessary, it's possible to find teachers here for that language. In addition, some arts such as music, embroidery, drawing, painting, etc. but this does not present a problem.

The American Protestants have established a girls' school a little way from the city: Wattana Wittaya Academy where—despite the distance—there are some American and Siamese teachers. But if we were to found another school in the same area, we are assured of having a large number of pupils and if we were to have American religious this would make it possible to sustain the comparison with the Americans of Wattana Wittaya Academy.

Can you help us, Your Excellency, to find a congregation of religious for this purpose? We already have a house which would suffice until the number of pupils reach over a hundred. Meanwhile we could erect a larger building on another piece of land which we have reserved. Later on, the sisters could establish themselves outside of Bangkok in the cities of the province where they would be certain to succeed and to do much good in helping in the great work of evangelization. The important thing, however, is to begin. In America there surely are religious congregations of women vowed to teaching. I beg you, Your Excellency, to come to our help as soon as possible. This work is of the highest importance for the future of the Mission. If we let this opportunity pass, it will be an irreparable loss for the future.

In the missions of Canton and Swatow there are some Ursulines from Canada. I don't know if this congregation has subjects and could accept our offer. I beg Our Divine Savior to enable you to find the necessary help for sowing good grain in a land which could produce abundantly. What difference when this good grain produces its harvest, our task is to sow as well as we can.

Letter from Angèle de Notre-Dame, Lorenziutti, OSU, Prioress General, to René Perros, March 10, 1924

It is with the most sincere gratitude that I come to thank you for your letter in which you appeal to the dedication of the Ursulines in behalf of your mission in Siam. Everything you told me, Your Excellency, is of the greatest interest and makes me want to respond to your request and to your confidence in us. At the moment, however, I cannot give you a definite answer.

You know, as do we ourselves, Your Excellency, how rare vocations are at this time and I must also consider how to provide subjects for the work already begun in Swatow.

Desiring with all my heart to respond to your zeal and seeing a sign from Providence in the possibility of a foundation in Siam, I have just sent a circular letter to the prioresses of all our communities to inform them of your letter and to remind them that they have a duty to encourage souls who feel themselves called to a missionary life.

This circular will be read during the novena in honor of St. Francis Xavier. I am sure that this Apostle of the Missions will bring you some favorable answer. May God raise up some solid vocations and enable this foundation which your generosity and your support have encouraged us to undertake. This would also be a great blessing for Swatow.

Letter from Marie du Rosaire Audet, OSU, Prioress of Swatow, to Angèle de Notre-Dame, OSU, March 22, 1924

I have just received the enclosed letter. Isn't this an answer from St. Joseph? At least we can go ahead now. With a noviciate in Canada within three years we will be able to recruit enough subjects for our needs and also for Siam, if Providence will lead us there. Bishop Perros is due to write to you and he is very hopeful that you will give him some religious. It will not be hard to satisfy him. He talks about the need to have subjects who know both French and English but in the beginning this will not be necessary provided that the religious know enough to be able to conduct business with the French missionaries and thus begin the foundation.

Bangkok is very wealthy. The Ursulines would have the education of the feminine nobility: princesses and women of the court, etc., etc.. What resources for the religious future of this people plunged into the darkness of paganism, if St. Angela—with her daughters—undertook the work of their evangelization. Bishop Perros will be very generous. The question of money will, I believe, be settled quickly. He wants to help us and has asked me what our financial situation is here in Swatow. St. Joseph is our provider!

APPENDIX B

Letter from René Perros, Bishop of Siam, to Marie de St. Jean Martin, OSU, Prioress General, August 6, 1928

....I have good news for you concerning your foundation in Siam. After the initial period when people were "waiting to see," pupils started coming and continue to increase. There are already more than 100 registered and almost that number presently in the school with about fifteen boarders. The spirit of the house is excellent, the children are happy, the parents are observing this with joy, and your good reputation is spreading more and more. Soon we will have run out of room, especially for the boarders, and it will be necessary to think about enlarging our present facilities.

Let us thank God that he has sent us souls to save. All the children assist at religious instruction; the Buddhists are not compelled to learn but even so they study and even if they are not baptized they will become acquainted with the truth, prejudices will fall away, and little by little their thinking will be changed.

But....and this is the most important point at the moment: we do not have sufficient personnel and are desperately in need of reinforcements. The mothers and sisters are devoted to their duties and I have to moderate their good will, insisting that they take the necessary rest. In this climate the ordinary hours for sleep as in Europe are not sufficient. Reverend Mother Marie Bernard, the prioress, is succeeding very well. She is both firm and

gentle, a living model of religious life and of work. She is an excellent superior and I remain profoundly grateful to you for giving her to us. At Rosary Church, Mother Marie Agnès and Mother Marie Gabrielle have a large number of pupils most of them Christian. There, too, everyone is very happy.

Not that we are exempt from troubles. Many have suffered from their health—but not seriously. We have also had some trouble in getting teachers for the Siamese language, but anyone used to living on the missions is not surprised to find some crosses in God's work. But all the distress passes quickly when one knows how to cast everything into the heart of Our Divine Savior. I don't have time to recount all the details—besides Mother Marie Bernard will keep you informed.

On September 8 I will offer the holy sacrifice for you, my dear Reverend Mother; it is the most precious thing I have to offer you. I do it gladly to prove our deep gratitude. In return, please pray for us and send us some reinforcements as soon as possible. There is so much good to be done and the moment is very favorable.

I bless you with my whole heart, dear Reverend Mother, along with all those confided to your maternal care.....

APPENDIX C

Letter from Marie de St. Jean Martin, OSU, to René Perros, February 5, 1938

Let me thank you for your kind and detailed letter, so full of solicitude and fatherly concern for our mothers and sisters of Siam. I thank you also for your interventions with the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda to help us obtain financial help, and for everything you have been good enough to tell me to put me au courant with the present state of our works at Bangkok and Chiang Mai.

I understand that all the changes which have taken place during these last years have seemed regrettable to you, Your Excellency. We have consented to this because it was hardly possible to do otherwise. Our very minimal resources have made the arrangement of subjects very difficult for our reverend mother provincials and the superiors of the missions. Last year I made canonical visits to all our houses in France and I was deeply grieved to see the paucity of subjects in so many of them. At the moment I am seriously wondering if the province of the north of France is able to sustain our Far Eastern mission. I have studied this question and I tell you in the strictest confidence that my fear is that we will have to link it to one of our provinces in America. We can come to no decision before the General Chapter which will be held at the beginning of September. I humbly ask the help of your prayers, Your Excellency, that we may know the will of God which, I hope, will be the sole inspiration of our decision.

I thank you for the good news you have given me concerning Reverend Mother Marie de St. Ignace Six. We counted on her very much but divine Providence seems to have other plans for this special soul. It pains me to think that *Mater Dei* is once again without a prioress but our dear Reverend Mother Marie Raphaela Vurnik, who has just been named Superior of the Mission, will take care of it with the help of her council. I am touched by your esteem for Mother Marie Bernard Mancel. I would be very happy to bring her back to Siam, as you wish, but I find it more prudent to leave the choice of prioresses to the mission council, to whom our Constitutions give this right as part of their duty.

Were you not suffering from ill health some time ago, Your Excellency? hope that this indisposition has passed and that you are now well again. In asking for your blessing one more time, I also entrust to your prayers the success of our General Chapter and offer you our profound and grateful respect.

APPENDIX D

Text of the diary kept by Sister Benigna Biemens, 1941-1945. Major portions of this diary were sent to her family in Holland in 1947 and were later printed in pamphlet form by her nephew. Translation from the Dutch was made by Sisters Carol Marie Keaney and Dolores Yanshak, osu.

Dear Family and Friends,

At the beginning of January 1941 I started a diary in Chieng Mai with the intention of eventually using it as an opportunity to tell you a little about my life here. I never thought that six long years would go by before I started on the story. It would be too much were I to tell you everything, so I will pick out the most important things....

I start on p. 12 in my little book, on January 23, 1941

This morning at breakfast our servants brought radio news that the Catholics must be careful. People say that the French in Indochina had destroyed statues of Buddha, burned down pagodas, and mistreated Buddhist priests. France protested and Thailand said if they [the French] didn't refrain, they would treat the Catholics here the way [the French] treated the Buddhists in Indochina, namely, destroy church and force the Catholics to renounce their faith. It was also reported that teachers were obliged to teach the Buddhist religion to the children in school. That was the beginning of much misery.

January 24:

All Thai teachers were called to a meeting. Europeans were not allowed to be there, so we were very curious about matters discussed. Two native sisters who live a few minutes away from us came to tell us everything when the meeting was over. The meeting lasted two and a half hours. They ridiculed God and especially the Blessed Mother and anything else that was holy and dear to a Catholic. Within two days all Catholics would be obliged to renounce their faith and if they refused then anyone could do anything to them that they wished. We were caught up in a terrible angst, not so much for ourselves as for the priests, the native religious, and the poor people, for the whole Catholic community in Chiang Mai consisted of extremely poor people. Pray, pray. Late at night, the Sisters came by again seeking advice and help in shopping at the market, for they hardly dared to go outside. While they sat in front of the house with Reverend Mother and the other sisters, and despite everything seemed to be enjoying themselves, Sister Jeanne and I were packing up for all of us so that we'd have something ready for a possibly quick departure. Suddenly a shot was heard just a few meters away. Everyone jumped up, toppling the chairs; the two of us wondered who was hit. We flew outside to see, while the others, deathly pale, came toward us. No one was hurt. Deo Gratias! But the fun was over; we knew now that it was serious. It was very late that evening before we could take the native sisters home. We went to bed wondering anxiously what the following morning would bring.

January 25:

I am going to the church for 5:30 a.m. Mass, the others will attend the second Mass at 6:00a.m. It's eerie in the dark, but the thought that there is nothing better than to die for Christ wins out and I enter the church where all the native sisters are praying. After Mass the priest turns and looks at me. I understand and go to the altar, stretch out my hands, and Father slips the ciborium into my right sleeve and the chalice into the left. I leave the church with these treasures, cross the street to the house where they would

be hidden. The Catholics persevere, they will not renounce their faith. We encourage them to be strong and to trust in God.

January 26:

The Catholics are required to go to the Pagoda to renounce their faith. They are not going. We have Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and remain praying. At 11 o'clock Father Bunchu (Thai) comes to say that three leading Thai male citizens order that the cross on the church had to be taken down within twenty-four hours, else they will destroy the church. Reverend Mother, accompanied by three sisters and two brothers, goes to the British Consul seeking help. They prove to be of service.

January 27:

The feast of our foundress. We wonder what will happen today. At 11 o'clock the twenty-four hours are over. Will they set fire to the church? As the hour approaches we all go, that is seven of us, to the church to protect it if necessary. The Blessed Sacrament and everything portable is already taken away. We pray and wait....nothing happens. After 12 o'clock we return home, we stand at the threshold just as Father comes with another letter that says, "the cross must be removed from the church." The priest says, "The cross remains on the church." Because of the feast, we have Mass early this morning in our own chapel. At five-thirty I stand in the dark in the garden, shivering from the cold, hidden by the hedges near the gate, to smuggle the priest in to avoid walking in the street. The native sisters come also, barefoot, with their belongings, for they dared not go home again. They stay with us, make lay clothing in order to flee unnoticed. In the evening they risk going back because the orphans are alone. They want to return that night to stay at our house, but as I wait for them in the dark around eight o'clock, suddenly a man stands before me at the hedge. I don't move. Joseph sees me and says, "Sister."

"Yes, young man, what's the matter?"

“Here is a letter. Quick!”

And he’s gone. I run in the dark to our house. While I pass the banana trees, the dog with me begins to bark sharply. I don’t feel safe but keep on walking. I give the letter to Reverend Mother who reads it. The sisters cannot leave their house because there are men sneaking about. We recommend them to God’s angels and go to bed in great fear that the priest or the sisters will be attacked during the night.

Nothing happens through January 31. The priest receives an anonymous letter that within seven days all Catholics and all religious will be burned. We prepare ourselves for this, but I laugh for I don’t believe it. Father Bunchu starts a novena of masses in honor of Our Lady. The whole town follows it. After Mass, a policeman stands at the gate: everyone must give his name, and all do so willingly. Mother Stanislas says to him: “If you need us, come along to our house but let’s not talk here in the middle of the street.” He answers, “Oh, I thought that no men were allowed to come to your house.” He comes along and we add our names to the “Book of Martyrs.”

February 3:

On February 3 it was something else. One of the native sisters lightly tapped a child on her leg with the ruler. The child goes home, tells her parents, whereupon the father, raging, takes the case to the police saying that the sister caused a wound on her head. The child did have a head wound, but no one knew that. Five policemen go to the school, the classmates witness as one that the sister hit her on the leg and not on her head. The sister had to go along to the police station and the child’s wound was examined. Two little Chinese girls maintain strongly that the wound was not caused by the sisters. The children were forced to kneel before Buddha and confess that the sister beat the child on the head. Both refused strongly. “That is not our God; we will not honor him.” The sister continued to be mistreated, offended, humiliated. This lasted a number of

days and Reverend Mother and Mother Stanislas repeatedly ran down to the Station to help the poor sister.

February 10:

They go again to the police station and then return unexpectedly. Thanks to the Blessed Mother the sister is declared to be innocent. Meanwhile, Father Gazetto (Italian Salesian) arrives from Bangkok to help Father Bunchu in his difficult task. Both now go to the Governor and the head of police. Everyone is friendly and kind, so that one thinks better times are coming.

February 11:

Holy Mass in Thanksgiving to the Blessed Mother. Solemn Benediction with the Magnificat and the Te Deum. After Benediction we receive news that Father Athanas has been missing for four weeks. On the 12th Father Bunchu sent someone to Merim seeking information about the lost father.

February 14:

Father Athanas is found, has been on a trip connected with his work; on return home he finds his church locked. Buddha has taken the place of Christ for a while. The differences between Indochina and Thailand remain. On the 16th the secretary of the English Consul comes to tell Reverend Mother that it is better for her to leave than to stay. Americans are also encouraged to go, but no one is disturbed by this; everyone remains at her post.

March 1:

There is peace declared between Indochina and Thailand.

Then my little book is silent for a long time.

What happened further with the persecution of the Church? The novena honoring Mary brought miracles. The Governor who was so mean toward God and his Mother was called away from Chieng Mai by telegram and relieved of his office. When leaders saw that the Europeans wouldn't allow anyone to "take the cheese from their bread" and went to higher authority, they became afraid and let the Catholics be. After a few weeks everyone grew calm. The stake was not set afire and the palm of martyrdom had yet to grow, waiting for another opportunity to be plucked. If they had wanted us then, then you would be able to pray for years to come: "St. Benigna, pray for us!" but now I pray each day, "Have mercy on us." But we really don't know—perhaps it will come some day. As a child I longed for martyrdom and, quite frankly, I believe that should it happen I would not be afraid. But we'll let that for the Lord to decide. ...Now we can begin to speak about the Japanese time.

December 8:

We hear that our sisters in *Mater Dei* were given one-half hour to leave the house. How awful! Later we hear that this is not true. Sr. Jeanne and I begin to pack our things and work until midnight. Rumor says that they will soon come here and the same lot as was *Mater Dei*'s will be ours, even though we offered our house as a hospital.

December 12:

In the morning Reverend Mother called us together. She was advised to leave quickly for it would soon be dangerous. Where to? There was possibly one chance to leave on the 1:30 train via Lampang-Chiengrai to Burma. And then?? Everyone hears that it is already too late and that we would fall in Japanese hands during the journey. Everything was safely secured. The Blessed Sacrament was taken away, the most necessary things packed, and still a few instructions given to Father Bunchu and the servants. At one o'clock, with empty stomachs and sad hearts, we stepped into the bus that would take us to the station.

Here I would like to add how, the days before, I took care of my little supplies and brought them into safety. We had some canned milk, jam, butter, and the like, saved, which altogether was not much but we were already very economical. It would be a great pity if a Japanese had even a little lick of it! Between light and dark I dug a sizable hole in the middle of the chicken coop where our boys usually threw the garbage. I rolled a large earthen pot to the hole (I could not lift it) and filled it with things that were no one else's business. I covered the pot with a piece of zinc and added a half meter of junk to the top of it. When I finished I was quite satisfied with myself; no one saw me, so I was not worried that anyone would find this. But then when we had to flee I was forced to show Father Bunchu the hiding place. I told him very clearly not to remove those things unless it was absolutely certain that we wouldn't be back. But—I'll let Agatha, our kitchen servant, tell what happened the day after we left.

There was a rumor that the Japanese would take over our house. The priest wanted to save what he could and called for help from half the neighborhood. They emptied the house. Then Father called Agatha and asked where the sisters hid the supplies underground. She was confused and said she knew nothing. Then he asked Amat and Joseph. Same. But someone must have helped the Sister! No one believed that anything was buried underground, for no one helped or saw the Sister do this. Still the Sister said it was there and to look in the chicken run. With the Father present, they started to dig and—yes!—the barrel appeared to everyone's surprise. But according to Agatha, Father was stunned, wondering how the Sister could do this. The Japanese would never have found it. But it was a good thing that Father and the workers had found it as will be seen from the following tales.

Now we return to the station where I left you and from where we departed at 1:30. We were seven sisters plus two brothers who would accompany us until we were safe across the border. These were two Spaniards who considered it their duty to protect us from possible enemies. We arrived at Lampang at 6:00p.m.. The police received us cordially and brought us to a hotel near the station. We were given two rooms for all of us and these

were next to one used by the Japanese Consul who was anything but friendly especially toward the brothers. We didn't sleep much that night. At 4:00a.m. the bus was to take us to Chiengrai. But during the night all the buses were taken to transport soldiers. We waited and waited, but nothing came. The Chinese hotel keeper felt sorry for us and tried to help us in many ways. In the end, at six o'clock, he had a small cart pulled handsomely by two horses. We loaded our baggage on to the cart. It was still dark and very misty when we left the hotel. We called it the Flight into Egypt, although I couldn't imagine St. Joseph with so many family members.

Where were we going? We couldn't possibly go to Chiengrai with this team of horses. But we couldn't stay in the city either where it was so dangerous. Reverend Mother and the brothers decided to go to the Mission and wait there until we could get a bus. An hour later we reached the poor Catholic Mission of Lampang. A small, empty little house where now and then a priest came to celebrate Mass. The poor people who lived in the area received us cordially and gave us something to eat. The brothers returned to the city to look for transport. At 9:00a.m. they returned with a bus that would take us to Chiengrai. On the way we were frequently stopped by the police, valises were opened, everything looked into, now and then something said cynically—that belongs to Siam—then we went on quickly to the next stop.

At six o'clock we arrived in Chiengrai and were welcomed warmly, even though the Governor dared not give us permission to go further during the night. Actually, according to the people there, we were only a half-hour from the Burma border. The Governor invited Reverend Mother to return in the morning when he would give his permission to continue the journey. So we went to a small hotel, ate and slept a bit and then the next morning brought a new surprise.

December 14:

The Governor gave us permission to leave, the bus would be waiting at ten o'clock. The brothers were not allowed to go further, but the police would escort us safely there. The bus came, its windows covered with blankets so that we couldn't be seen, nor could we see what was happening at the border. Then at the moment of departure the Governor announced, "We have just received a telegram. The border is closed!" There we were. What now? We all thought, to ourselves or aloud: "We should have stayed home." In thirty minutes a new message: "Leave the city." Ya! Good! But where to? And how?

When, wringing our hands in perplexity, we stood in front of the Governor's house, a strapping young man approached the brothers and said, "Hello, Brother, what are you doing here? Do you remember me?" It was an alumnus of the brothers' school at Bangkok. The brothers told him what happened and how difficult it was, for there was no bus available. "Come," he said, "you'll get a bus to Lampang and from there return to your house." Then he added simply, "Look, I'm a brother of the Governor and my sister is a teacher in *Mater Dei* in Bangkok. We have to help the sisters, don't we?" What a relief! You can understand our happiness. He called to the driver, saying, "Turn your bus around and drive these sisters to Lampang."

"No" was the answer; "I must drive soldiers."

He called to a second driver and received the same answer.

"You are not taking soldiers, but these sisters."

"I have no gasoline."

"Buy some."

"I have no money."

The young man was furious; he kicked the driver and said, "One, two, three, or you'll go to jail."

He didn't like that, so the trip was arranged. We gratefully shook hands with our benefactor and left. The whole group of passengers consisted of a police officer, nine soldiers, seven sisters, two brothers, and several Thais. The first hour went well, then suddenly the bus veered to the left and stopped before a rice storage place.

"Everyone out!" was the command

"What do we have to do here?" we asked.

"Load rice."

"How many sacks?"

"Thirty."

"Will we all fit?"

"Yes, we'll easily have room."

Well, we soon found out how that would go! Everyone crept in and tried to find a place. Most squatted on the side of the sacks, but Mother Bernadette and I didn't know what to do with our legs for apparently they were less flexible than those of the others. In the center the sacks were higher, so we climbed up and had exactly enough room to keep our heads free from being bumped, if the bus didn't go too fast. However, in the end we were sorry not to have sat lower. I had to pay dearly that I wanted to sit higher than the others. I sat in a terrible draft, and for months I experienced consequences of that ride. At the time though I felt it didn't matter. Just the fact of going home was worth it.

We were often stopped but in general the police were very friendly, except for the driver. He could have been more thoughtful. We could have been in Lampang by evening but we were deceived by our expectations, so by evening we had only gone one-third of the way. Some started to feel hungry, but I had been hungry for half a day already. Toward evening we stopped at a Chinese restaurant—at least it was called that, but I've seen cow stalls in better order than this. Most lost their hunger, but the brothers, Mother Bernadette and I risked entering the restaurant. The people there looked at us with mouths agape; they had never seen such a strange sight in the north of Siam. The dirty dishes and glasses didn't whet our

appetites, but we laughed and said to each other: "Maybe tomorrow we'll have supper in prison and it will be worse than this."

Meanwhile our eyes fell on a roasted chicken and a loaf of bread. We HAD to buy these for—Ya!—one could not know where they would bring us and whether they would feed us. In the past we'd buy this for four and a half ticals and consider it expensive, now we paid twenty-five ticals. The driver was apparently in no hurry, for he ate, talked, laughed and acted as if he were in charge of heaven and earth. Finally he moved to go on, and we were very pleased with what we had eaten and what we bought for the journey.

We were a show for the people for a while and certainly for the angels and we went forth full of courage. At almost every moment something was wrong with the motor; it was continually gasping and often stopping. Later we learned the real reason for this. The driver was drafted for military service and he was taking steps so as not to be able to be on time for entrance.

At midnight we stopped again. We all left our rice sacks and enjoyed the stillness of the night. The air was fresh and the moon clear. We walked back and forth and chatted. A speeding car came suddenly toward us. A police agent. He stopped and began to question us. We had the impression that he had been drinking heavily. He asked if we wanted to return home. Yes, of course, that was our only wish if the police in Lampang would let us go. He laughed heartily and said, "I am the boss and I know you; tomorrow morning I'll bring you to the train. He especially stressed that we should not be worried because HE had control of the situation. He left, we laughed a bit and thought that it was a joke, for how could he go twelve hours to Chiang Mai and be back in Lampang in the morning? Impossible. The man showed a good heart and that means much when one is in such circumstances.

At one o'clock we went on and finally at three o'clock we reached Lampang. We were very curious about where they would bring us now.

They stopped at a telephone booth. "We have a bus full of aliens who left for the border yesterday but it is closed and they sent them back. What are we to do with them? Dutch, American, English, and others. Where can we take them?" They apparently didn't know what to do with us so we asked if we could be taken to the Mission and they granted this. At 3:30a.m. we stood at the door of the sleeping Mission. The people inside were quickly awakened and were happy to see us again. They opened the little house. The brothers looked for a small place in the room that could serve as chapel, while we were given the honor of Father's little room. All voted to give the cot to Mother Ursula; two benches for two people who are small of stature; the floor was enough for three more and then there was a shelter, a meter long, half mesh-half glass which I could use if I made myself very small—much to the delight and humor of the others.

Everyone was exhausted and after ten minutes I dreamed that I had a pain in my leg. I stretched it out and was rudely awakened by the tinkling of the glass door that I had kicked in. The next morning the whole family was able to get over their little aches and pains when they knew they would have roast chicken and bread for breakfast. The people were very kind and brought us "tea"—as they called it—but it must have been a special kind for I have never drunk the likes before. We had powdered milk brought in a small case for Reverend Mother, but Mother said, "It tastes so strange; what kind of milk is it?" I tasted it myself and yes—what was that taste? Moth balls! But how could that be? The puzzle was quickly solved. The police had so often looked and sniffed through our things on the top of the bus that a lot fell out and was put back in the valise, among others the moth balls had been misplaced into the milk can.

At seven o'clock a young man, well known at Regina Coeli and living in the neighborhood of the Mission, came to offer his services. I don't know how he knew we were there but within a half hour he was back with servants who placed a festive breakfast before us. How grateful we were to Our Lord. We talked a bit more and then the brothers went out to get permission to leave for their homes. Later, we too had to go to the Police Station. The chief was very friendly and asked the brothers where all the

strange men came from. When the brothers with great difficulty explained that we were women, not men, he was even more friendly. We asked if he objected to our returning to Chieng Mai. He said, "No, go, but why did you flee? Are you afraid that we would reject you? Certainly we wouldn't. Go in peace to your house; you shouldn't have left it." And who was there when we arrived back at the Mission? Our friend of the night. "Well," he said, "and how are things now? You are going home, aren't you? I promised you that, didn't I? Come, I'm going along to the train." And what he said happened. At 1:30 we sat safely on the train and toooot—tooooot the train left.

At six o'clock we arrived in Chieng Mai. People who saw us leave three days earlier now looked at us agape. Some said, "It's not the same ones, for they left in black and these are wearing white—(indeed we had changed our clothes). Others said, "Yes, they are the ones; I know one of them very well." Everyone helped us and called out, "Welcome back!" Within five minutes we sat by twos in Siamese taxis on our way home.

It was almost dark as we rode through the gate and in a flash the whole neighborhood came around. The people cried out, leaped, jumped, making us quite nervous. Then the Fathers came, having been told, but very unbelieving. Nevertheless it was certain that we were home in the house that now looked different from three days earlier because: IT WAS EMPTY! The Fathers had thought, "It is better and safer in our hands than in the hands of the Japanese" and had taken away all that was of value. We had nothing, not even a grain of rice to prepare for a quick supper. Nothing but empty cupboards—I'll not say what I thought!

December 17

We are home; we slept well and ate a little for there wasn't much. Then we brought back what we could. The rice had been given to the poor; most of it is with the Fathers and the native Sisters. Neighbors helped to take it away and now that it had to be returned, we had to see how we could get part of it back. It was a good two weeks before things were relatively in

order again. I had never miscalculated so often as I did in those days, for everything that I needed had disappeared somewhere else. Then came a new misery: Mother Charles, an American, was called by the police to be interrogated.

December 18

Mother Charles must be separated from the rest of us. The infirmary in the new building becomes her prison cell. In the afternoon the same sentence awaits the three Dutch sisters. A decision is made that it is better that the four prisoners use the old building and the three that are still free use the new building for we were not allowed to come together. We tease Reverend Mother Ursula Savage (Irish) and foretell that we will see her soon in the old castle. Reverend Mother answers: "They won't get me; I'm Irish!" We shall see.

December 19

There it is. They come to look at Reverend Mother's papers. At last books come out, for it has not yet reached Chiang Mai that [a country called] Ireland exists.

December 20

Reverend Mother will accompany us! We ask permission for Holy Mass in the house. Not granted. No one except the police can come near us.

December 21

It is a calm day; we get some rest after the tiring experiences that we had. We don't need to be anxious, they say; why should we be afraid? We have more policemen than prisoners!

December 22

Each one begins to work again. It doesn't go smoothly because we are separated from the others and from everything we need. Sister Jeanne gets along well doing her things: cleaning, polishing, sewing, healing any sick there might be, and so forth. It is harder for me for the kitchen is in the new building and I may not go there, nor in the laundry. The garden is also outside and I have to stay inside. I hear the chickens cackle but I can't go to gather the eggs. What can I do? I say to the police: "I may not go into the kitchen, so you go and ask them for all the things I need to bake the Christmas cookies." He brings me what I request. I make the cookies, put the goods to be baked on a plate and the policeman brings it to the kitchen where the cook bakes them and gives them to the policeman to bring back to us.

They begin to feel sorry for us; I get the freedom to act, but wherever I go or stand I have a friend with me. We plant together in the garden, feed the chickens and the rabbits. But I was clever enough to succeed in going to the laundry by myself. I had made a pact earlier with the kitchen girls, agreeing with them in signs. They came into the laundry from the other side and we could "discuss" things. Clever as they were, our friends never noticed this.

December 23

It is becoming serious. At noon we hear that on December 26 we will depart for Bangkok. Will they put us in camp?

December 25

A very meager Christmas. The day went by peacefully until six minutes before five o'clock. Mother Bernadette and Mother Stanislas have gone to church. Three of the "prisoners" are saying their office in the chapel. I am downstairs and hear a knock at the door. I open it, thinking the police need something. That is true. A high official, a very serious man, stands before

me, salutes and says, "I come to tell you politely that you must leave at five o'clock." "What time is it now?" "It is six minutes to five."

What do I do first? Out of fear I pull on a big bell that brings everyone stumbling downstairs. Even the Sisters in the church hear the bell and come hurrying into the house. Leave immediately? And we have nothing ready. One of the two walks back to the rectory and asks permission of Reverend Mother to let her take the Blessed Sacrament out of the tabernacle. Of course! In haste we receive Communion from the hands of Reverend Mother since the priests are not allowed to come in and they expect that the Japanese will immediately take over our house.

The girl in the kitchen fills a case full of bread, some butter and milk. The bus comes roaring in and an Oriental is at once before us with a gun and a bayonet, as if he must take on a group of bandits. He looks everything over and shouts something that no one understands, but we do understand that we must leave. No one to say goodbye to, because everything happened so fast that there was no time to warn anyone. We leave; the Japanese soldier sits with his bayonet directly across from Reverend Mother. It is a fearful sight. Where are they taking us? We stopped twice on the way to pick up some English gentlemen who must undergo the same fate as we. They had hardly enough time to clothe themselves decently; they were literally driven out of their homes.

We are curious to know what they are going to do with us, since there is no train until tomorrow morning at 10:30. There is more of this rough ride before we reach the station. "Get out! Leave your baggage." It is true, they brought it to us later—but not everything. I never again saw the package with the nice aroma that my kitchen girl had pushed into my hand. The Japanese had probably seen that it smelled good. A teacher came after us to find out where they were bringing us. A small house was shown us very near the station. It had two small rooms. One of them was for us; the other for the gentlemen. There were two beds for us and a place to wash, etc. It seems the gentlemen didn't need these. They got nothing! Our evening meal was brought to us from home; it was given to the Thai

policemen and they brought it to us. I can only praise the way we were treated by the Thai. The police who brought us out from *Regina Coeli* had tears in their eyes and said, "I hope you understand that this way of treating you does not come from us. We are sorry but the Japanese have control." "Yes, we understand that," we said; "we see it with our own eyes."

In the evening our suitcases were inspected again. We ate something, even though it stuck in our throats, then we prayed a little and tried to get a place in bed. We were three in one bed, two in the other—something I hadn't done in nineteen years! I didn't sleep. I coughed and grumbled the whole night through. The trip to Burma was still affecting my chest—it will continue to bother me for years to come.

December 26

The next morning they brought us food from home again. At 10:00a.m. we went to the station where a few faithful friends risked coming to bid us farewell. Though we couldn't say anything, still I was able to give a few messages to my faithful ex-worker, Agatha. I reminded her to take care of my dear young turkey chicks which were just hatched. That was crazy of me but a person's heart is like that—you have to have something to love even if it's only a dumb turkey. Quickly the police came between us and [our friends] were made to stand at a distance. We had to get on the train—3rd class! You have to be in Siam to know what that means. The gentlemen protested that it wasn't decent to treat ladies like that, but always the same response, "We can't do anything about it; it's the Japanese." We were given four policemen in our car as security; all in all it was good company.

The whistle blew and slowly the train rolled away from Chiang Mai. We had to give some of our limited space to the police. After all, they couldn't do anything about their situation—it was their duty to be there. The trip went well. At night everyone tried to make it as comfortable as possible for the others and tried to sleep. I never sleep while traveling—and this was no exception. The policeman who sat beside me began to nod and finally landed with his head on my shoulder. He found a good support there to the

merriment of his fellow policemen. Even the chief, who usually had a sour face, loosened up. I let them laugh and let the poor soul sleep. Later, at a big bump, he came to and was deeply embarrassed. I calmed him and told him it was all right.

December 27

Arrived in Bangkok where two sisters from *Mater Dei* stood waiting for us. We had no idea what was going to happen to us. Were we to be brought to some concentration camp? If only we could go to live with our Sisters in *Mater Dei*. Would they permit that? We asked our guards: "Where are you bringing us?" Always the same answer: "Mi-Mai-Sap—I don't know." After waiting a long time at the station, a bus finally came for the gentlemen to take them to the camp. We grew anxious and almost hopeless. Finally someone came to pick us up. We had to go to the police station. After some discussion we heard that we really could join with the other prisoners at *Mater Dei*. What joy! We were so thankful to the Lord for this help. The Thai policemen waved us a friendly good-bye and promised to tell the Sisters in Chiang Mai the good news—and they really did!

In *Mater Dei* the whole community was waiting for us. We were welcomed home. We went directly to the chapel to thank God for this wonderful turn of events. Some religious from other congregations had to spend a great deal of time in the camp while we could live peacefully in our own convent. Three or four days later two Sisters went to Chiang Mai to help fill the empty places there.

Once in a while the police came to make sure that none of us had flown the coop. We were not allowed to go out and four policemen stayed on guard. However we became friends very quickly and when it was mango season two months later, they came each day to help me pick them. Reverend Mother saw me picking mangoes with the policemen one day and teased me about it at recreation. "What is this? A sister picking mangoes with the

police!" We never had any trouble with them after that. We were lucky compared to so many others.

What else do I need to tell you? It is bomb time. Everyone has heard so much these years about bombs exploding, and bombs that set everything on fire, that I feel it is unnecessary to say anymore about it. We have spent so many hours in the bomb shelter that I still become tense when I think about. Besides that, the nightly route via the rice paddy was always difficult for me and I began to cough as soon as the door was closed to the fresh air. So I spent most of the time outside, under a palm tree right near the bomb shelter. If danger threatened, I ran into the shelter and was out of it just as fast when there was no immediate danger. I kept doing that until June 5th when an unfriendly one threw a grenade right behind the kitchen which I had just left moments before.

Ten days later most of us departed for Hua Hin on the sea where we stayed peacefully for ten months.

APPENDIX E

Contract drawn up between Bishop René Perros and the Japanese authorities, for the lease of Mater Dei, signed Friday, April 13, 1945. This document has been reproduced exactly as it appears in the Mater Dei community diary.

The lease agreement of the building. Kazuo Mackino, the head of the Accounts Department of the Gi. #7970 Corps of the Imperial Nippon Army (herinafter called The Tenant) herewith concludes the following agreement with regard to the renting of the buildings with R.R. Bishop R.Perros (Catholic Mission).

Article I:

The seat of the said buildings, the number of buildings, their construction, floor space, rent, and the period of the lease, etc. are as per stated in an attached sheet:

Seat of buildings: Mater Dei Girls' School, Ploenchit Rd., Bangkok

Number of buildings: 3 buildings

Construction: Slate roofed, wooden building, 2 stories, concrete building, chalked roof

Area: Total of area 32,000 sq. metres; floor space 3500 sq. metres

Rent: 7,000 ticaux per month

Terms: not stipulated

Remarks: rent to be paid 3 months on avance. When the contract be cancelled in less than the 3 months, the balance prepaid to be refunded to the tenant.

Article II

The rent stipulated in accordance with the above mentioned article is to be paid for three months ahead on the first of each quarter at Gi #7970 corps. However, in case of days be less than one month the relative rent is to be paid by the days.

Article III

In case of the said buildings be destroyed by fire or damaged, excepting by the act of God, such as natural calamity or an air raid, etc., the Tenant compensates inclusively for such damages.

Article IV

The Tenant is requested to obtain the consent of the owner when the Tenant wants to set to enlarge the said buildings and or to build new buildings, or to remodel the said buildings (including the equipment of water works as well as the electric instalment.

Article V

The general repairs in order to preserve or to maintain the said buildings is as a rule to be done by the Tenant, and as far as the Tenant uses the buildings the repairing of the roofs of such buildings is also be done by the Tenant.

Article VI

In case of the said buildings be returned to its owner, it is a general rule that the said buildings be returned to its original state, however, the said

buildings are to be returned in the exsistive state at the time of his return in case of there exists a special arrangement between both parties.

Article VII

The case of there existing any doubt in the articles in this agreement, or any particulars not stipulated in the agreement, such a case is to be interpreted in cooperation with the commissioners concerned of the Alliance Liaison Office as well as the officers concerned of the Nippon Military Officers suggestion.

Article VIII

This agreement remains in force from the day concluded and in case there being requested to cancel the said agreement it is to be referred to discussion among the commissioners concerned in accordance with the Article VII.

Article IX

This agreement is to be made in written from in duplicate and after having duly signed and sealed by both parties concerned, one of them to be kept by each party.

13 April 10h, 1945

The Tenant: Kazuo Mackino

The owner: Mgr. R. Perros

APPENDIX F

MISSIONARIES IN THAILAND 1924-1945

Junegunde Bagczar

Born 1892, Budapest, Hungary

Religious profession 1912, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Arrived Thailand 1931

Left Thailand 1932

Lorenzina Belotti

Born 1896, Trescore, Italy

Religious profession 1922, Calvi, Italy

Arrived Thailand 1927

Transferred to China 1928

Returned to Thailand 1936

Left Thailand 1937

Died Calvi 1969

Benigna Biemans

Born 1904, Beck en Denk, Holland

Religious profession 1925, Vught, Holland

Arrived Thailand 1940

Marie Stanislas Bosnak

Born 1910, Bucany, Czechoslovakia

Religious profession 1932, Beaugency, France

Arrived Thailand 1935

Elizabeth Brosmith

Born 1888, Middletown, New York, USA

Religious profession 1914, Middletown

Arrived Thailand 1933

Left Thailand 1933

Died New Rochelle, N.Y., 1970

Rita Buttell

Born 1895, Sutton, Nebraska, USA

Religious profession 1917, Fishkill, N.Y.

Arrived Thailand 1936

Left Thailand 1939

Died Arcadia, Missouri, USA, 1969

Teresa Cito

Born 1896, Solto, Italy

Religious profession 1922, Solto

Arrived Thailand 1926

Left Thailand 1959

Died Gavardo, Italy, 1975

Marie Joseph (Bunprachak) Dardarananda

Born 1912, Bangkok

Religious profession 1932, Beaugency, France

Returned to Thailand 1934

Agnès Delattre

Born 1890, Polincove, France

Religious profession 1924, Tournai, Belgium

Arrived Thailand 1924

Died Bangkok 1944

Marie Joseph Douville

Born 1896, St. Casimir, Canada

Religious profession 1925, Swatow, China

Arrived Thailand from China 1936

Transferred to China 1940

Died Waterville, Maine, USA, 1979

Marie Bernadette Farget

Born 1905, Aubigny, France

Religious profession 1927, Beaugency, France

Arrived Thailand 1929

Left Thailand 1971

Died St. Saulve, 1992

Marie Gérard Farget

Born 1892, Paris, France

Religious profession 1916, Tournai, Belgium

Arrived Thailand 1932

Transferred to China 1934

Died St. Saulve, 1988

Gemma Feeney

Born 1893, Kilkenny, Ireland

Religious profession 1919, Crewe, England

Arrived Thailand 1929

Left Thailand for Brazil 1953

Returned to Thailand 1960

Died Chiang Mai, 1981

Maria Luisa Geminati

Born 1899, Torino, Italy

Religious profession 1921, Calvi, Italy

Arrived Thailand 1927

Transferred to China 1931

Returned to Thailand 1934

Left Thailand 1935

Mary Beatrice Hanson

Born 1900, Galveston, Texas, USA

Religious profession 1923, Dallas, Texas

Arrived Thailand 1931

Left Thailand 1947

Died New Rochelle, New York, USA, 1993

Deodata Hocevar

Born 1910, Mokronog, Yugoslavia

Religious profession 1933, Beaugency, France

Arrived Thailand 1937

Left for Indonesia 1952

Died Indonesia 1997

Francis Xavier Johnson

Born England

Religious profession 1929, Westgate, England

Arrived Thailand 1929

Left Thailand 1932

Augustin Jakcin

Born 1883, Zagreb, Yugoslavia

Religious profession 1911, Tournai, Belgium

Arrived Thailand 1938

Died Bangkok 1955

Teresita Lightwood

Born 1906, Sheffield, England

Religious profession 1925, Upton, England

Arrived Thailand 1928

Left Thailand 1942

Marie Bernard Mancel

Born 1874, Mortain, France

Religious profession 1896, Mortain

Arrived Thailand 1928

Left Thailand for China 1935

Died Swatow, China 1950

Thérèse Matthieu

Born 1879, Les Rousses, France

Religious profession 1903, Voiteur, France

Arrived Thailand 1928

Left Thailand 1930

Died Bandung, Indonesia, 1952

Clotilde Angela McCan

Born 1903, Gorey, Ireland

Religious profession 1924, Galveston, Texas, USA

Arrived Thailand 1931

Died Chiang Mai 1941

Marie Thérèse Mertens

Born 1895, Antwerp, Belgium

Religious profession 1918, Greenwich, England

Arrived Thailand 1924

Died Bangkok 1949

Marie Marcelline de Nijs

Born 1900, Sumatra, Indonesia

Religious profession 1930, Malang, Indonesia

Arrived Thailand 1939

Died Bangkok 1968

Marguerite Marie Penn

Born 1894 Den Haag, Holland

Religious profession 1920, Venray, Holland

Arrived Thailand 1928

Left Thailand 1935

Died at Grubbenvorst, Holland, 1977

Marie Xaveria Pirc

Born 1894, Borovnica, Yugoslavia

Religious profession 1919, Mekinje, Yugoslavia

Arrived Thailand 1924

Transferred to China 1925

Returned to Thailand 1933

Died Bangkok 1987

Marie Véronique Poutrain

Born 1904, Croisilles, France

Religious profession 1926, L'Arbaletière, France

Arrived Thailand 1929

Died Chiang Mai 1996

Mary Charles Roberts

Born Silex, Missouri, USA

Religious profession 1933, Alton, Illinois, USA

Arrived Thailand 1938

Died Bangkok 1998

Francis Rooyakkers

Born 1906, Nederwith, Holland

Religious profession 1927, Vught, Holland

Arrived Thailand 1933

Transferred to China 1936

Marie de St. Jean Ruegg

Born 1891, London, England

Religious profession 1915, Tournai, Belgium

Arrived Thailand 1935

Died Bangkok 1964

Marie Ursula Savage

Born 1893, Carlinford, Ireland

Religious profession 1914, Vught, Holland

Arrived Thailand 1939

Died Surabaya, Indonesia 1978

Mary Sheehan

Born 1901, Decatur, Illinois, USA

Religious profession, 1922, Alton, Illinois, USA

Arrived Thailand 1931

Died Chiang Mai 1937

Marie de Lourdes Simons

Born 1899, New York, USA

Religious profession 1923, Begeauncy, France

Arrived Thailand 1927

Left Thailand for Rome 1937

Died Kaohsiung, Taiwan 1984

Marie de St. Ignace Six

Born 1904, Tourcoing, France

Religious profession 1927, Beaugency, France

Arrived Thailand 1933

Transferred to China 1934

Returned to Thailand 1936

Left Thailand 1937

Died St. Saulve, France 1999

Angèle de Notre-Dame Tan

Born 1913, Bangkok, Thailand

Religious profession 1936, Beaugency, France

Returned to Thailand 1939

Marie Jeanne Terrace

Born 1893, Assche, Belgium

Religious profession 1913, Savanthem, Belgium

Arrived Thailand 1927

Died Bangkok 1967

Jeanne Marie van der Aalst

Born 1909 Eindhoven, Holland

Religious profession 1934, Bandung, Java

Arrived Thailand 1940

Gabrielle van Niewkuyk

Born 1891, Vlissingen, Holland

Religious profession 1916, Grubbenvorst, Holland

Arrived Thailand 1927

Left Thailand 1928

Died Grubbenvorst, Holland 1988

Marie Raphaela Vurnik

Born 1898, Radovljica, Yugoslavia

Religious profession 1918, Mekinje, Yugoslavia

Arrived Thailand 1924

Left for Rome 1947

Died Ljubljana, Yugoslavia 1983

Fabian Waters

Born 1908, New York, USA

Religious profession 1932, Beacon, New York

Arrived Thailand 1935

Left Thailand 1940

Died New Rochelle, N.Y., USA 1990

Theophane Westerman

Born 1907, Anaheim, California

Religious profession 1929, Beacon, New York

Arrived Thailand 1933

Annunciata Wögerer

Born 1889, Lewes, England

Religious profession 1919, Salzburg, Austria

Arrived Thailand 1935

Transferred to China 1936

Returned to Thailand 1951

Died Bangkok 1958

